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Journal of Family Relations Studies

Journal home page: <http://jhfs.uma.ac.ir/>



Research Paper

Investigating the effectiveness of positive psychotherapy on cognitive flexibility and distress tolerance in divorced women



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Citation: Khorasani, A. H. (2024). [Investigating the effectiveness of positive psychotherapy on cognitive flexibility and distress tolerance in divorced women (Persian)]. *Journal of Family Relations Studies*, 4 (13): 32-39. <https://doi.org/10.22098/jfrs.2024.13635.1144>

doi 10.22098/jfrs.2024.13635.1144

ARTICLE INFO:

Received: 2023/09/07

Accepted: 2024/04/20

Available Online: 2024/06/15

Key words:

positive psychotherapy, cognitive flexibility, distress tolerance, divorced women

ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of positive psychotherapy on cognitive flexibility and distress tolerance in divorced women.

Methods: The study population consisted of all divorced women in Damghan City in 2020, from which 30 individuals were randomly selected and assigned to the control and experimental groups (15 individuals in each group). The Distress Tolerance Scale, Cognitive Flexibility Inventory, and Positive Psychotherapy Protocol were used to collect the data, and the ANCOVA test was used to analyze the data. The ANCOVA results showed that the intervention group obtained significantly higher scores in cognitive flexibility and distress tolerance than the control group ($p < 0.01$).

Results: According to the findings, cognitive flexibility and distress tolerance significantly increased in the experimental group. According to the findings of the present study, positive psychotherapy and improvement of psychological components such as psychological flexibility and distress tolerance can play an important role in improving the mental health of divorced women.

Conclusion: By focusing on talents and abilities, a positive therapeutic approach can use the potential capacities of people in order to improve psychological problems to a significant extent.

1. Introduction

Divorce is one of the basic factors of the breakdown and disintegration of the most fundamental structures of society, i.e., family, which can be the source of many social harms, to the extent that some researchers consider it as one of the most stressful situations that a person faces during their life because the negative effects of divorce are long-lasting (Lin & Brown, 2020). Also, divorce is associated with a range of negative psychological consequences, including increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, and somatization (Jafari & RashediAsl, 2023). Symptoms of anxiety, depression, and somatization.

The breakdown of a relationship is one of the most stressful interpersonal losses, which can lead to problems and fluctuations in one's cognitive, behavioral, and emotional traits. Since women experience more negative emotions due to emotional sensitivities, they are more vulnerable to the effects of divorce compared to men (Ding et al., 2021). Actually divorced women are among the most vulnerable groups in society, who face mental, psychological, social, economic, and cultural difficulties and disabilities (Almardani Someeh et al., 2023).

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The level of distress tolerance is one of the variables that can play a role in the adaptation and mental health of divorced women (Shujja et al., 2022). Studies have shown that one of the consequences of divorce is psychological distress (Mandemakers et al., 2010). According to Simons and Gaher (2005), distress tolerance is a common construct in research related to emotional regulation, which is defined as a meta-emotion experience and an individual's capacity to experience and withstand negative emotional states. Research findings (Chen et al., 2022) indicate that distress tolerance influences the assessment and consequences of negative emotional experiences. Those with low distress tolerance demonstrate weaker coping abilities in the face of phenomena such as divorce, thus striving to avoid such negative emotions by employing strategies to reduce negative emotions. Additionally, couples with low emotional distress tolerance are unable to effectively control their emotions in stressful life situations and deal with life challenges (Leopold & Kalmijn, 2016).

Cognitive flexibility is considered another influential variable in the adaptation and mental health of divorced women (Carbonella & Timpano, 2016). Richardson and Jost (2019) define cognitive flexibility as the individual's assessment of the controllability of situations, which may change in different circumstances. Cognitive flexibility enables individuals to respond to pressures, challenges, and other emotional and social issues appropriately and effectively. Three aspects of cognitive flexibility are a) a tendency to perceive difficult situations as controllable conditions, b) the ability to provide multiple explanations for life events and human behavior, and c) the ability to generate multiple solutions for challenging situations (Salari Far & Fattahi, 2021).

Mikaeli, Rahimi, and Sedaghat (2018) found that divorce has a significant negative relationship with cognitive flexibility, adaptive motivational structure, and communicative pattern of speaking-listening, while there is a significant positive relationship between divorce and the non-adaptive motivational structure and communication pattern of conformance. Shafiei et al. showed that the average scores of divorced individuals on the variable of ineffective attitudes were significantly higher than those of non-divorced individuals. However, concerning cognitive flexibility and its subcomponents, the average scores of divorced individuals were significantly lower than those of non-divorced individuals. Furthermore, Johnco et al. (2014) concluded that poor cognitive flexibility has a negative impact on cognitive restructuring skills,

while higher cognitive flexibility allows individuals to focus more on alternative methods of cognitive changes.

Positive psychotherapy is an effective approach to increasing distress tolerance and cognitive flexibility in divorced women (Zmigrod et al., 2019). Positive psychotherapy is considered a therapeutic approach based on the principles of positive psychology, officially introduced by Martin Seligman in 2000 (Moskowitz et al., 2021). Traditionally, healthcare approaches and research have mainly focused on the diseases and negative aspects of the clients, neglecting their capabilities and positive aspects (Tejada-Gallardo et al., 2020). This psychotherapy, in contrast to current approaches, focuses on increasing positive emotional interactions and giving meaning instead of setting goals (Seligman et al., 2006). Empirically speaking, positive psychotherapy is a valid approach to psychotherapy that places special emphasis on building the strengths and positive emotions of clients (Dambun & Dubuy, 2014), advising therapists to focus on the positive process of their clients. Positive psychotherapy is based on three assumptions. First, instead of trying to avoid unhappiness, worry, and anxiety, clients inherently seek growth, fulfillment of personal desires and ideals, and happiness. If growth stops, therapy will also stop. Second, positive resources, such as one's capabilities, are considered as valid and real as symptoms and disorders. The symptoms and signs, such as delusions or other clinical symptoms, are shaped through discussion and manifestations of positive resources, not only through long-term analysis of deficiencies, illnesses, and damages (Stemmler et al., 2021). Meta-analysis studies indicate the effectiveness of positive psychotherapy from different aspects (Carr et al., 2021).

A review of the literature on the effectiveness of positive psychotherapy indicates a set of different and numerous variables. Some variables can be classified in the class of positive psychological characteristics, such as resilience, self-esteem, emotion regulation, psychological flexibility, and mental happiness (Lakani & Akbari, 2021), happiness and psychological well-being character abilities (Khodabakhsh et al., 2015; Moradi & Sadeghi, 2018). Additionally, some have focused on pathological and clinical variables (Keshavarz Mohammadi, 2018; Khodabakhsh et al., 2015; Mashak et al., 2021). Three studies have investigated the effectiveness of positive psychotherapy on divorced women. Resilience, self-esteem, happiness, and psychological well-being were the intervening variables in these studies.

The results of these studies have indicated the effectiveness of positive psychotherapy. Furthermore, as the findings of correlational studies have shown, there is a difference in psychological flexibility between divorced women and those without a history of divorce. Women with a history of divorce have less psychological flexibility (Shafiei et al., 2016). In addition, women inclined to divorce have reported less psychological flexibility compared to women who do not have such a tendency (Khazaei & Bababei, 2022). Although in studies related to divorced women, there is no finding that positive psychotherapy is effective on psychological flexibility, similar studies have shown that this method of treatment can strengthen this trait (Lakani & Akbari, 2021). Regarding psychological distress, some studies have confirmed the effectiveness of positive psychotherapy on this variable. In a study on infertile women, Mashak, Naderi, and Chinaveh (2021), for example, found that the positive therapeutic approach significantly reduced psychological distress in the intervention group compared to the control group.

The pressure of economic problems, single parenting, and social problems causes divorced women to face many challenges and difficulties compared to other women, and this increases their psychological distress. On the other hand, these women need more psychological flexibility to solve problems better and faster and to face upcoming challenges more efficiently. It seems that positive psychotherapy can influence these variables in interventions as one of the therapeutic approaches. In this regard, although few studies have been conducted on other groups, the effectiveness of this treatment method on divorced women regarding psychological flexibility and stress tolerance has not been studied. In addition to developing the research background, the findings of this study intend to expand and promote the professional and specialized strategies of mental health professionals, especially social workers and psychotherapists.

2. Materials and Methods

As an applied study, the present research relies on a quasi-experimental method utilizing a pretest-posttest design with a control group. The study's statistical population consisted of all divorced women in Damghan City in 2020 who sought counseling services from family counseling centers. Thirty individuals were randomly selected and assigned to control and experimental groups (15 participants in each group). The study established specific inclusion criteria for participants, which were as follows: the

individuals who had experienced a divorce within the range of 6 months to 3 years prior to the study; the individuals who were not currently using psychiatric medications; and the individuals who did not have any diagnosed mental disorders.

The experimental group received eight 60-minute sessions of positive psychotherapy, while the control group did not receive any intervention. After the completion of the intervention, a posttest was administered to both groups. To conduct this study, the researcher initially visited family counseling centers in Damghan City and contacted 30 divorced women after making the necessary arrangements. Having given their informed consent, the participants were randomly assigned to two groups: the intervention group (15 participants) and the control group (15 participants). The study objectives were explained to the participants, and written consent was obtained from them to participate in the study. Both groups underwent a pretest. The experimental group received eight 60-minute sessions of positive psychotherapy in a group format, while the control group did not receive any training during this period. At the end of the positive psychotherapy sessions, a posttest was administered to both the experimental and control groups. The questionnaires used in the present study are as follows:

Distress Tolerance Scale (DTS): This scale is a self-report measure of emotional distress tolerance developed by Simons and Gaher (2005). The scale consists of 15 items, and the responses are scored on a five-point Likert scale. The validity and reliability of this scale were reported by Simons and Gaher (2005), with an alpha coefficient of 0.82 for emotional distress tolerance. The intraclass correlation coefficient after six months was found to be 0.61. The scale has a positive correlation with mood acceptance and a negative correlation with coping strategies such as using alcohol and marijuana use, including the use for improvement (Simons & Gaher, 2005). Esmailinasab M (2014) obtained a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.86 for the overall scale.

Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI): Developed by Dennis and Vander Wal (2010), this questionnaire is a short 20-item self-report tool used to measure cognitive flexibility. The scoring method is based on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 to 7. It aims to measure three aspects of cognitive flexibility: a) perception of controllability, b) perception of behavioral explanations, and c) perception of alternatives. Dennis and Vander Wal (2010) demonstrated in their research that the questionnaire has factor structure, convergent validity, and concurrent validity. The concurrent

validity of the questionnaire with the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II) was reported to be -0.39, and its convergent validity with Martin and Rubin's Cognitive Flexibility Scale was 0.75. The researchers obtained reliability using Cronbach's alpha of 0.91, 0.86, and 0.090 for the Alternatives subscale, control subscale, and the full score, respectively. They also reported test-retest reliability using the retest method as follows: full score (0.81), Alternatives subscale (0.75), and Control subscale (0.77). In the Iranian context, Soltani et al. (2013) reported the CFI test-

retest reliability as follows: full score (0.71), Control subscale (0.87), Alternatives subscale (0.89), and behavioral explanation (0.55).

Positive Psychotherapy Protocol: Based on Magyar-Moe's *Therapist's Guide to Positive Psychological Interventions* (Magyar-Moe, 2009), a positive psychotherapy protocol was designed and implemented for the experimental group over eight weekly sessions, each lasting 60 minutes. The protocol is described in Table 1.

Table 1. A brief description of positive psychotherapy sessions

Session	Objective	Content
1	Introduction and orientation	The focus was on introducing and familiarizing the members with one another, as well as raising awareness about the framework of positive psychotherapy. The roles and assumptions of the therapist, along with the responsibilities of the participants, were explained. All participants were asked to write a one-page positive introduction of themselves.
2	Identification of personal strengths	The members engaged in a fruitful discussion and exchange of ideas, focusing on the strengths mentioned in their stories as the central topic.
3	Gratitude and contentment	The previously mentioned strengths in the stories were reviewed, and a discussion occurred regarding completing the Values in Action questionnaire that some of the members had conducted. The group members were asked to start a gratitude journal and write down at least three good things that happened to them each day.
4	Identification of good/bad emotions	This session helped the group members understand the role of good and bad emotional memories in maintaining their symptoms. The members were assisted in expressing anger, bitterness, and other negative emotions. They were then encouraged to discuss the effects of these emotions on problems and their improvement.
5	Forgiveness	The construct of forgiveness was introduced and emphasized as an alternative to negative emotions such as anger and bitterness. It was highlighted that forgiveness has numerous benefits for the person who forgives. As an exercise in forgiveness, the group members were asked to write a letter to someone they held a grudge against, even if that person was deceased. However, they were instructed that the letter should not actually be delivered to the transgressor. It was explained that the letter has therapeutic benefits.
6	Gratitude	The focus was on practicing gratitude exercises to improve relationships with colleagues, friends, and family. Therefore, the role of good and bad memories and the impact gratitude has on such memories were discussed. Then, the members were asked to write a gratitude letter to someone they had not properly thanked.
7	Optimism and hope	Those who lacked positive emotions about the future were asked to complete a door-opening and closing exercise with the group members. In this way, they were asked to recall three times when they had lost something important.
8	Love and attachment, life meaning, and conclusion	The topic of love and attachment was discussed, and the group members were helped to understand that a fulfilling life comes through meaningful relationships with others, characterized by enthusiasm and connection. They were encouraged to adopt an active and constructive approach, which involves warm and responsive communication with others, enthusiastic response, sustained eye contact, a smile, and positive emotions.

After the intervention, the participants underwent a posttest. SPSS software was used to analyze the data. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was employed to test the research hypotheses and examine the normality of the distribution of variables in the pre-and posttests. Moreover, Levene's test was used to assess the homogeneity of variance. A multivariate covariance (MANCOVA) analysis was utilized to compare the mean scores between the experimental and control

groups and control the effect of pretest scores on posttest scores.

3. Results

Table 2 presents the descriptive indices of cognitive flexibility and distress tolerance variables in the pretest and posttest, which are presented by group and include the minimum and maximum scores, means, and standard deviations.

Table 2. Descriptive indices of cognitive flexibility and distress tolerance variables in experimental and control groups (n=30)

Variables	Test	Positive psychotherapy (experimental group)		Control group	
		Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Perception of controllability	Pretest	4.35	4.37	18.25	7.28
	Posttest	12.97	9.24	18.05	6.67
Perception of alternatives	Pretest	2.98	3.03	11.57	4.81
	Posttest	9.37	6.26	10.67	5.12
Perception of behavioral explanations	Pretest	10.56	8.01	27.07	9.94
	Posttest	28.17	11.99	26.22	9.55
Cognitive flexibility	Pretest	5.97	4.80	17.62	6.43
	Posttest	19.77	9.67	16.22	5.88
Distress tolerance	Pretest	9.89	8.87	27.60	11.39
	Posttest	23.80	13.48	19.57	12.09

According to Table 2, the posttest mean of the experimental group is higher than the control group's mean in the variables of cognitive flexibility and distress tolerance.

MANCOVA was used to examine the effectiveness of positive psychotherapy on cognitive flexibility and distress tolerance in divorced women.

Table 3. MANCOVA results regarding the effectiveness of positive psychotherapy on cognitive flexibility and distress tolerance in divorced women in the experimental and control groups

Variables	Total sum of squares	Degree of freedom	Mean Squares	F	Significance level	Effect size
Cognitive flexibility	804.21	1	402/10	6.09	0.003	0.050
Distress tolerance	2956/65	1	1478/33	10.41	0.001	0.082

Table 3 presents the results of MANCOVA concerning the effectiveness of positive psychotherapy on cognitive flexibility and distress tolerance in divorced women in the control and experimental groups. As shown in Table 3, the MANCOVA F-statistics indicate a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in the variables of cognitive flexibility ($F=6.09$, $p<0.001$) and distress tolerance ($F=10.41$, $p<0.001$)—after controlling for the pre-test effect.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of positive psychotherapy on cognitive flexibility and distress tolerance in divorced women. The results showed that after receiving positive psychotherapy instructions, the experimental group obtained significantly higher scores in cognitive flexibility than the control group. These findings are consistent with the results of the studies conducted by Khazaei and Bababei (2022), Ghorbani Amir et al. (2019), and Feizikhah, Hassanzadeh, and Abbasi (2021).

It should be noted that positive psychology focuses on individuals' positive characteristics, abilities, and virtues. This awareness of personal positive capabilities leads to increased cognitive flexibility, especially in controlling stressful situations and finding effective problem-solving strategies. This

therapeutic approach enhances cognitive flexibility in women and strengthens problem-solving capabilities, thus increasing their ability to confront problems with an active problem-solving approach (Morrish et al., 2018).

Increasing cognitive flexibility enables divorced women to adapt by changing their cognitions (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010). Equipped with increased cognitive flexibility, divorced women can display habitual responding patterns by switching their cognitive sets in response to changing environmental conditions (Johnco et al., 2014).

The results of the study also showed the significant effect of positive psychotherapy on distress tolerance in divorced women. The findings are consistent with the results of studies conducted by Keshavarz Mohammadi (2018), Mashak, Naderi, and Chinaveh (2021), Araghian et al. (2020), Seligman, Rashid, and Parks (2006), Fredrickson and Losada (2005), Lyubomirsky and Layous, (2013), Cohn and Fredrickson (2010), and Rad, Toozandehjani, and Golmakani (2020).

Moreover, the study by Donaldson et al. (2019) can help explain the findings of the present study. According to their study, the educational approach of positive psychotherapy leads individuals to use the best strategies for coping with their own crises by fostering a positive attitude toward themselves. These factors strengthen their tolerance to stress and other

threatening conditions. In addition, such instructions enable individuals to become optimistic not only about themselves but also about others and their surroundings. They justify their problems with a positive outlook, which reduces their difficulties and ultimately improves their distress tolerance. According to the positive psychology approach, well-being and distress do not exist inherently in individuals but result from complex interactions between the individual and the surrounding environment. In positive psychotherapy, individuals enhance their psychological capacity through evaluation, identification, and development of their capabilities (Seery et al., 2010). Emphasizing positive emotions and nurturing capabilities leads to psychological well-being, hence an increase in the level of distress tolerance (Keyes & Simoes, 2012). Overall, it was observed that positive psychotherapy could have positive effects on cognitive flexibility and distress tolerance among divorced women, reducing their negative emotions and helping them use non-destructive adaptive strategies in the course of their lives. Conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic prolonged the data collection process. It is suggested that the effects of positive psychotherapy be compared with other therapeutic approaches to determine the most suitable therapeutic approach to be used to promote the mental health of divorced women.

5. Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

All ethical principles are considered in this article. The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and its implementation stages. They were also assured about the confidentiality of their information and were free to leave the study whenever they wished, and if desired, the research results would be available to them.

Funding

This research did not receive any grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or non-profit sectors.

Authors' contributions

All authors have participated in the design, implementation and writing of all sections of the present study.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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