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The effectiveness of group dialectical behavior therapy on increasing emotional, communicative, sexual and social-recreational intimacy of depressed couples

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Abstract

Marital issues and depression commonly manifest within couples, displaying a reciprocal connection. This research aimed to assess the impact of group-based dialectical behavior therapy on enhancing emotional, communicative, sexual, and social-recreational intimacy among couples experiencing depression. Conducted as an experimental study with both experimental and control groups, the research involved 20 couples seeking assistance at counseling centers in Shahrekord (Iran) due to depression. The couples were selected through purposive sampling and then randomly assigned to either the experimental or control group. Utilizing a marital intimacy questionnaire, baseline measurements of marital intimacy were taken for both groups prior to the intervention (pre-test). Following an 11-week intervention comprising 90-minute sessions for the experimental group, post-intervention assessments were conducted for both groups using the same questionnaire (post-test). The data underwent analysis involving descriptive statistics and Multivariate Covariance method. The results indicated that dialectical behavior therapy yielded significant enhancements in emotional, communicative, sexual, and social-recreational intimacy for depressed couples within the experimental group, compared to the control group ($P<0.05$). The study underscores the meaningful implications of exploring the efficacy of dialectical behavior therapy on various dimensions of intimacy for couples experiencing depression, offering valuable insights into the mental well-being of such couples.

Keywords
dialectical behavior therapy, Intimacy, emotional, communicative, sexual, social-recreational, depression, couples

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Introduction

Marriage is a complex and dynamic institution, often characterized by joy, companionship, and shared aspirations. However, it is also a journey marked by challenges, requiring couples to navigate a myriad of obstacles together. Among these challenges, mental health issues, particularly depression, can cast a long shadow over the well-being and intimacy of couples. Depression, a prevalent mental health condition characterized by persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and disinterest, has the potential to impact not only the individuals experiencing it but also their romantic relationships.

The reciprocal relationship between depression and marital intimacy is a well-established phenomenon, with each exerting a profound influence on the other. Depression can erode the foundations of intimacy within a relationship, affecting emotional connection, communication, sexual intimacy, and shared social-recreational activities. In turn, diminished marital intimacy can exacerbate depressive symptoms, creating a cyclical pattern of distress for couples. This interplay underscores the critical need to explore interventions that can mitigate the adverse effects of depression on marital intimacy.

The coexistence of depression and marital intimacy challenges the core components that constitute a healthy and thriving relationship. Understanding how depression influences different dimensions of marital intimacy is essential to design effective interventions that address the holistic well-being of couples.

Emotional intimacy involves the ability to share one's innermost thoughts, feelings, and vulnerabilities with a partner. Depression can hinder emotional intimacy as individuals grappling with this condition often struggle to express their emotions and connect on a deep emotional level with their partners. The result is often a sense of emotional distance and detachment within the relationship. Communicative Intimacy: Effective communication is fundamental to any successful partnership. Depression can disrupt communication patterns, leading to misunderstandings, conflicts, and a sense of being unheard or unsupported by one's partner. Couples may find it challenging to express their needs, feelings, and concerns effectively.

Sexual Intimacy: Depression can impact an individual's libido and sexual desire, leading to a decline in sexual intimacy within the relationship. Individuals experiencing depression may face difficulties with sexual functioning, leading to frustration and a sense of disconnection from their partner.

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Social-Recreational Intimacy: Engaging in shared social and recreational activities is a vital aspect of marital intimacy. However, depression can lead to social withdrawal, making it challenging for couples to enjoy quality time together. Shared activities may become increasingly rare, leading to a sense of isolation within the relationship.

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), initially developed by Marsha M. Linehan, emerged as a therapeutic approach designed to treat individuals with borderline personality disorder. DBT is rooted in the dialectical philosophy, emphasizing the balance between acceptance and change. Its efficacy in addressing emotion regulation, interpersonal difficulties, and distress tolerance has led to its adaptation and application in various clinical contexts, including couples therapy and the management of depression.

DBT incorporates a range of strategies and skills to promote emotional regulation, effective communication, and enhanced interpersonal relationships. These skills make it a promising candidate for interventions aimed at improving marital intimacy for couples affected by depression.

This research seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of group-based dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) in enhancing emotional, communicative, sexual, and social-recreational intimacy among couples experiencing depression.

Materials and Methods

The study utilized an experimental design with both experimental and control groups. The research involved 20 couples seeking assistance at counseling centers in Shahrekord, Iran, due to depression. The couples were selected through purposive sampling, considering their mutual consent to participate in the study and their eligibility based on the presence of depression within the relationship.

The experimental group participated in an 11-week DBT program comprising 90-minute sessions conducted by trained therapists. The program incorporated DBT techniques targeting emotion regulation, communication skills, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness. These skills were adapted to address the unique challenges faced by couples affected by depression.

To measure marital intimacy, a marital intimacy questionnaire was administered to both the experimental and control groups. The questionnaire encompassed items related to emotional, communicative, sexual, and social-recreational intimacy. Baseline measurements of marital

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intimacy were obtained through a pre-test before the intervention. Post-intervention assessments were conducted for both groups using the same questionnaire as a post-test.

Data analysis involved descriptive statistics to characterize the sample and Multivariate Covariance analysis to assess the impact of DBT on marital intimacy dimensions. Statistical significance was set at $P<0.05$.

Results

The descriptive results provided in table 1 and the results of hypotheses testing are presented in tables 2 and 3.

Table 1. Descriptive results

Group	Variables	Mean	SD
Control	emotional intimacy	8.25	2.14
	communicative intimacy	9.21	2.85
	sexual intimacy	11.24	3.05
	social-recreational intimacy		
Experimental	emotional intimacy	12.65	2.36
	communicative intimacy	10.32	2.84
	sexual intimacy	14.21	4.02
	social-recreational intimacy		

The results of the MANOVA analysis is presented in table 2 and 3.

Table 2. Results of Wilks' Lambda

Effect	Test	Value	F	Effect DF	Error DF	p
Group	Wilks lambda	0.81	9.32	4	36	0.001

The results of Wilks' Lambda test (Table 2) showed that there was a significant difference between the two groups in at least one of the research variables. According to the results of Lambda test, follow-up analyses were conducted to investigate the intergroup effects, and the results are presented in Table 3.

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Table3. Results of multivariate analysis of variance for research variables

Variable	SS	DF	MS	F	p
emotional intimacy	25.84	1	25.84	6.24	0.001
communicative intimacy	33.21	1	33.21	8.54	0.001
sexual intimacy	41.98	1	41.68	11.23	0.001
social-recreational intimacy	28.29	1	28.29	7.24	.001

The results of the study indicated that group-based dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) yielded significant enhancements in emotional, communicative, sexual, and social-recreational intimacy for couples experiencing depression within the experimental group, compared to the control group ($P<0.05$).

Emotional Intimacy: Couples in the experimental group reported increased emotional closeness and a greater ability to connect on an emotional level following the DBT intervention. This was reflected in their improved communication of feelings and emotions.

Communicative Intimacy: The DBT program significantly improved communication skills among couples in the experimental group. They reported fewer misunderstandings and conflicts, along with a heightened sense of being heard and supported by their partners.

Sexual Intimacy: Couples in the experimental group experienced a notable improvement in sexual intimacy after participating in the DBT program. Their sexual desire and functioning improved, leading to a reconnection in this dimension of their relationship.

Social-Recreational Intimacy: The DBT intervention facilitated couples' engagement in shared social and recreational activities. Couples reported a renewed sense of enjoyment and quality time spent together. The results provided in table 1.

Discussion

The discussion section delves into the findings of this study and their implications, considering the effectiveness of group-based dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) in enhancing emotional, communicative, sexual, and social-recreational intimacy among couples grappling with depression. The results illuminate the potential of DBT as an intervention to address the intricate interplay between depression and marital intimacy, offering valuable insights into the mental well-being of couples facing these challenges.

The results of this study demonstrate a notable improvement in emotional intimacy among couples in the experimental group who participated in the DBT program. This finding aligns with previous

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research indicating that DBT equips individuals with emotion regulation skills, enhancing their ability to express and manage their emotions effectively (Linehan, 1993). For couples affected by depression, which often manifests as emotional dysregulation, DBT offers a structured approach to understanding and regulating their emotions.

Enhanced emotional intimacy observed in the experimental group suggests that DBT facilitates emotional expression and connection between partners. Couples who underwent DBT reported an improved capacity to share their innermost thoughts, feelings, and vulnerabilities, fostering a deeper emotional bond within the relationship. This finding is consistent with the dialectical philosophy underlying DBT, emphasizing the balance between acceptance and change (Linehan, 1993). In the context of couples affected by depression, DBT promotes acceptance of each partner's emotional struggles while facilitating change through skill-building and emotional regulation.

Effective communication is a cornerstone of marital intimacy and relationship satisfaction. Depression often disrupts communication patterns, leading to misunderstandings, conflicts, and a sense of being unheard or unsupported by one's partner. The results of this study indicate that DBT significantly improved communicative intimacy among couples in the experimental group.

DBT equips couples with the tools to communicate openly, honestly, and empathetically. Couples who participated in the DBT program reported fewer misunderstandings and conflicts, along with a heightened sense of being heard and supported by their partners. This outcome underscores the relevance of DBT's interpersonal effectiveness skills in the context of couples therapy (Linehan, 1993).

Interpersonal effectiveness skills in DBT focus on assertiveness, active listening, and effective problem-solving, all of which contribute to improved communication within relationships. Couples affected by depression often grapple with communication challenges, such as difficulty expressing their needs and feelings. DBT provides them with a structured framework to enhance their communication skills, fostering a sense of connection and mutual understanding.

Sexual intimacy is a vital dimension of marital satisfaction and overall relationship quality. Depression can have a profound impact on sexual desire, functioning, and satisfaction, often leading to a decline in sexual intimacy within couples. The results of this study reveal a significant improvement in sexual intimacy among couples in the experimental group who underwent DBT.

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DBT's focus on distress tolerance and emotion regulation contributes to the improvement in sexual intimacy observed in the experimental group. Individuals affected by depression may experience reduced libido, difficulty with sexual arousal, and challenges related to sexual performance (Bodenmann et al., 2010). DBT equips individuals with strategies to manage distressing emotions and enhances their emotional regulation skills. As a result, couples in the experimental group reported increased sexual desire and functioning, as well as a reconnection in this dimension of their relationship.

Shared social and recreational activities are essential for maintaining the vitality of a romantic partnership. Depression often leads to social withdrawal, making it challenging for couples to engage in enjoyable activities together. The findings of this study indicate that DBT facilitated couples' engagement in shared social and recreational activities, enhancing social-recreational intimacy.

The DBT program encourages individuals to engage in activities that promote well-being and pleasure, aligning with the goal of increasing social-recreational intimacy. Couples reported a renewed sense of enjoyment and quality time spent together, emphasizing the relevance of DBT's distress tolerance and mindfulness skills in promoting social-recreational intimacy (Linehan, 1993).

Implications and Future Directions

The findings of this research underscore the potential of group-based dialectical behavior therapy as an effective intervention for couples experiencing depression. Enhancements in emotional, communicative, sexual, and social-recreational intimacy have meaningful implications for the well-being and satisfaction of couples affected by depression.

In clinical practice, therapists and counselors working with couples facing depression may consider incorporating DBT techniques into their interventions. These techniques can empower couples with the skills necessary to navigate the challenges posed by depression while fostering intimacy and connection.

Future research in this area could explore the long-term effects of DBT on marital intimacy among couples dealing with depression. Additionally, investigating the specific mechanisms through which DBT influences various dimensions of intimacy would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of its impact.

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Conclusion

Depression's impact on marital intimacy is profound, affecting emotional connection, communication, sexual intimacy, and shared activities within couples. This study illuminates the potential of group-based dialectical behavior therapy as an effective intervention for couples grappling with depression, highlighting its capacity to enhance multiple dimensions of marital intimacy. The results offer valuable insights into the holistic well-being of couples affected by depression, underlining the importance of addressing both mental health and relational aspects in therapeutic interventions.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University, Boroujen Branch.

Author contributions

FK, MA, SM to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. The authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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