

Cognitive therapy for relationships research paper

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)



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Abstract

Research in cognitive behavioral therapy demonstrates its effectiveness for people with a variety of problems, including couples experiencing marital distress. Dessaulles, Johnson, and Denton determine in their study that cognitive therapy is as effective as pharmacotherapy in managing depression and marital distress (2003, p. 345). Emanuel-Zuerveen and Emmelkamp determine in their study that cognitive therapy focusing on the couple is more effective than treating each person in the relationship individually (1996, p. 181). Dattilio's article presents current techniques used in relationship cognitive therapy, typical cognitive distortions that couples in therapy possess, and other useful knowledge for therapists (2008). Along with examples from other researchers, the causes of marital distress are explored, with a focus on what causes negative feelings and cognitive distortions experienced by couples. Considering the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral therapy for couples as found by the researchers, a professional who is well versed in using cognitive therapy in relationships who can provide a neutral and mutual negotiation for a couple is one of the most effective ways for couples to find relief from marital distress.

Cognitive Therapy for Relationships

A long-term relationship is not always a bed of roses. Conflicts are bound to arise from time to time. Most often, these conflicts cause one partner to develop negative feelings towards the other. When differences arise, each individual in the relationship will try to solve their own problems, which further increases the rift. The success of a relationship, therefore, lies in the

ability of the couple in question to solve conflicts before they escalate to catastrophic levels. Some of the most common points of conflict include breakdown of communication, different views concerning finances, parenting, sex, and handling external parties such as friends and family. Considering the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral therapy for couples as found by the researchers, a professional who is well versed in using cognitive therapy in relationships who can provide a neutral and mutual negotiation for a couple is one of the most effective ways for couples to find relief from marital distress.

Current Research

Current research in cognitive therapy describes findings on why problems occur in relationships and the effect cognitive therapy has on relationships. Author Frank Dattilio, in his 2008 article *Cognitive Therapy for Relationship Distress*, published for the Academy of Cognitive Therapy, evaluates the concepts of cognitive distortion that lead to derangement in people's perception and the effects on relationships. The process and effects of cognitive therapy for people with relationship distress are also examined. Dattilio's article is not a research study or paper about an experiment, but an exploration of current techniques used in relationship cognitive therapy and typical cognitive distortions that couples in therapy possess. The introduction describes why cognitive therapy is "an increasingly popular avenue for attempting to remedy distressed relationships," and describes why cognitive therapy in general is useful (Dattilio 2008, p. 1). The article offers definitions of different types of cognitive distortions, reasoning for why cognitive distortion is often a problem factor in relationships, and information on how

cognitive therapy is used by therapists to help those experiencing relationship distresses. The article is based on the author's own experience and articles written as an expert in the field of cognitive therapy as a member of the Faculty of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School as well as on other expert's articles (Dattilio 2008, p. 1). The cumulative knowledge culled from a variety of studies and sources provide the material for this overview of cognitive treatment for people with relationship distress.

Dessaulles, Johnson, and Denton, in their 2003 article *Emotion-Focused Therapy for Couples in the Treatment of Depression: A Pilot Study*, published in the *American Journal of Family Therapy*, compare cognitive or emotional therapy with pharmacotherapy in the management of depressive conditions. Their purpose was to discover which form of treatment works better in this particular situation.

In order to find out the answer to their question, " Eighteen distressed couples in which the female partner met diagnostic criteria for major depressive disorder were randomly assigned to 16 weekly sessions of emotion-focused therapy or pharmacotherapy with desipramine, trimipramine, or trazadone," and twelve of these couples completed the study (Dessaulles, Johnson & Denton 2003, p. 345). The participants who were in the pharmacotherapy group were only seen in for clinical management and drug maintenance, while the participants in the cognitive therapy saw doctoral interns for one individual session for each partner and 14 sessions together (Dessaulles, Johnson & Denton 2003, p. 349). The researchers discovered that while the pharmacotherapy and cognitive therapy groups were equally effective in reducing symptoms of depression, "

there was some evidence that females receiving EFT made greater improvement after the conclusion of treatment than those receiving pharmacotherapy” (Dessaulles, Johnson & Denton 2003, p. 345).

Emanuel-Zuerveen and Emmelkamp, in their 1996 article Individual Behavioral-Cognitive Therapy v. Marital Therapy for Depression in Maritally Distressed Couples, published in The British Journal of Psychiatry, evaluate the effects of individual behavioral cognitive therapy or marital therapy for couples with depression. Their purpose is to see which, if either, method is better.

In order to discover the answer to their question, 27 individuals were selected who complained of marital distress and depression. They were randomly assigned to either the individual therapy or marital therapy groups. The researchers discovered that though both methods were effective, they were more effective when the approach focused more in the two individuals as a couple rather than dealing with them individually.

The research from these articles shows that cognitive marital therapy may be more effective, especially when concurrent problems such as depression exist, and may have longer lasting effects than drug therapy alone. Dattilio’s summary of cognitive behavioral marital therapy techniques shows that therapists have a lot to guide them in assisting couples who are dealing with marital distress.

Causes of Negative Feelings

Communication Breakdown.

Good communication is important in enhancing daily life and in resolving conflict. Communication not only improves one’s self-awareness but also

awareness of others around him/her. Being aware of a spouse's feelings is important in a relationship as it helps one prepare appropriate communication methods depending on a partner's predisposition. One way of communicating poorly is by withholding negative feelings. According to Spett, a spouse may not communicate negative feelings to their partner for fear of conflict (2006). What they fail to realize, however, is that this withholding acts as an incubator for a larger conflict. Spett explains, " these feelings build up and manifest themselves later as annoyance, withdrawal, sarcasm, an angry explosion, or withholding affection (2006, p. 1).

When there is poor communication amongst a couple, misperceptions of each other's behavior are most likely to occur. In a counteractive emotional response, a partner is likely to interpret a counterpart's behavior as hate. Misperception often leads to low self-esteem where the affected partner feels they are unloved or that they are controlled too much.

In tandem with communication, another important factor is tone. When one partner speaks to the other in an angry, critical, or sarcastic tone, there is likely to be a breakdown in communication. In most cases, the partner being addressed will most likely respond negatively so as not to appear submissive or subdued. The speaker may not even realize they are speaking in an angry tone and may therefore misperceive their partner's reaction as disrespect or rudeness. This, in turn, leads to development of negative feeling towards each other.

Cognitive Distortions.

Discord among couples is caused by one of several reasoning errors. One of the errors is arbitrary inference, which refers to " the process of drawing a

specific conclusion in the absence of evidence to support the conclusion or even when the evidence is contrary to the conclusion" Dattilio (2008, p. 1). For instance, a woman may refuse to get intimate with her husband after a late party and then the husband concludes that his wife is seeing someone else.

Selective abstraction happens when a conclusion is drawn upon one thing taken out of context without regard to other pertinent features. For instance, if one partner calls the other and the call is not answered, the other concludes that he or she is being ignored.

Overgeneralization takes place when a conclusion is drawn from unrelated incidents. For instance, a woman who was previously married to an abusive and alcoholic husband may conclude that all men who drink alcohol are abusive.

Magnification or minimization takes place when " the significance of an event is evaluated as crucial or trivial when an objective assessment does not warrant this evaluation" Dattilio (2008, p. 1). For instance, a couple may get lost in a new town, and the woman accuses the man of being stubborn and never asking for directions.

Personalization occurs when a partner relates external events to themselves even though there is no logical connection. For instance, a husband may find his wife cleaning the toilet she had already cleaned and thinks that she never appreciates the work he does.

Dichotomous or Black and White thinking occurs when one categorizes experiences in opposites such as good and bad, love and hate. An example

is when a partner expresses his dislike for a certain dress and the other thinks, “ I can never dress appropriately for him” (Dattilio, 2008, p 1).

Socio-Economic Status.

The socioeconomic status of an individual is determined by level of education and income. Researchers have found that education can help individuals improve their communication skills, hence helping them solve differences. On the other hand, financial constraints can make spouses more prone to anger and express less emotional support to each other (Amato & Previti 2003). Scholars Amato and Previti state that individuals with a high socioeconomic status may expect higher standards for a relationship (2003). These individuals may also expect more emotional support, companionship, and personal fulfillment from their partners. All these may be interpreted by the other partner as egocentricity and may consequently sour the relationship.

Sex.

As much as sex can be a fulfilling and binding factor between two people in a long-term relationship, it can also be the cause of strife. Sexual experience can be influenced by factors such as past experience and differing expectations. For instance, people who have been sexually abused before may not enjoy lovemaking if the act triggers undesirable memories. The other partner in the relationship may misinterpret this as a sign that they are unloved or that they are inadequate. Another example is if a spouse resents his or her partner and sex is used as a tool for either reward or punishment; this pitches the partners in an adversarial position. Couples who have had a long-term relationship may experience reduced frequency of sex because of

lack of interest. If not addressed, this can also lead to development of negative feelings between partners.

Negative Family and Friends

According to Rich, other people such as friends and family who possess negative attitudes can influence perception about the quality of a person's life (2012). Friends may influence one to have a bad attitude even towards a partner. This may be in form of mental or verbal criticism of the partner's body shape, opinions, and interests. If not addressed, the bad attitudes of others can lead to strife in a relationship. If partners in a relationship were brought up in different ways compared to each other, being in a relationship means that each they must re-adjust to accommodate each other's attitudes and beliefs. This is often difficult, especially if the opposite family members desire that they maintain their perceptions concerning life, values, and attitudes that they received during their upbringing. The difference in values and perceptions may make a partner to develop negative feelings towards their spouse.

Parenting

Each party in a relationship may have a different idea when it comes to parenting. This may be in regards to the number of children they want to have, their birth intervals, adoption, and methods of bringing up the children. Although they may have communicated their expectations to each other earlier on, these may change due to external influences. Different expectations or even changes in them may make the partner whose ideals

are overridden to feel like they are being ignored. Consequently, this leads to development of negative feelings.

Conclusion

Successful relationships are often the result of hard work and perseverance. Even though love is an important ingredient, it might be difficult to express it amidst negative feelings. Each party in a relationship is unique in their own way; therefore, differences in opinions are bound to come up from time to time. The manner in which these differences are handled determines the shape of the relationship. This is where cognitive therapy for relationships helps. However, most couples do not seek help from professional therapists until a break-up is imminent. Timely involvement of a professional therapist can go a long way in helping partners solve their differences, appreciate each other, and make sure that their relationship lasts.

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