



## Analysis of the Components of Marital Relationship Enrichment Program

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Marital relationship enrichment program is designed for couples who have relatively good relationship and desire to improve it. The enrichment program seeks to improve couples' relationships and determine the factors and conditions upon which marital satisfaction and compatibility can be realized after marriage. The objective of this study was to analyze the components of marital relationship enrichment program using a qualitative method.

**Methods:** This study was conducted using a qualitative method based on deductive content analysis. At first, 46 related sources (13 books, 30 papers, and 3 theses) were used to identify and extract the components related to enriching couples' relationships. Purposive sampling was used and data collection continued until the data saturation point. Then, the relevant components were extracted and the obtained data were recorded and classified into codes, subthemes, and main themes based on the shared content.

**Results:** The data extracted in this study were classified into 52 codes, 21 subthemes, and 5 main themes. The main themes of enriching couples' relationships included developing awareness and cognition, communication skills, emotional literacy, commitment to improve the relationship, and conflict resolution skills.

**Conclusion:** Taking into account the results of this study concerning the components of enriching marital relationship can provide the necessary context for success in marriage.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Qualitative research, Marital therapy, Marital relationship, Marital enrichment program

### Introduction

The need for love and intimacy, creating an intimate relationship with spouse, and satisfying emotional and psychological needs are among the main reasons for couples to marry (1). Today, life expectancy has increased, social expectations have changed, and new models of marriage have emerged that are based on intimacy, companionship, and cooperation rather than sheer duty and responsibility (2). Enriching the relationship

between spouses has a decisive role in enhancing the mental and social health of family and community (3). In recent decades, family therapists have tried to break free from the negative outlook that has dominated this area (4). In many approaches and patterns of family therapy, the focus has shifted from deficits to family-based strengths so as to present a robust health-centered model (5). This positive and forward-looking stance has led to asking how



families can succeed instead of asking how families face problems (6).

These approaches teach skills that help satisfy basic family needs such as love, kindness, belonging, trust, loyalty, security, and fun (7). Compassionate empathy is the most important factor in enhancing security, validating couples' relationships, and building a constructive and healthy atmosphere for personal growth (8). As time passes, life becomes more desired for couples and they find out that life is moving toward positive changes, especially if individuals practice the skills they have learnt in their marital relationship (9). Many theories, models, and approaches have been formulated for enriching couples' relationships. A combination of these theoretical models can provide a framework for the mental perception of couples so as to improve their relationships.

In such circumstances, understanding the components of marital relationship enrichment is important for maintaining the physical and mental health of the couples and the community, on the one hand, and improving and promoting couples' relationships through conducting accurate scientific researches on the other hand. In fact, couples' marital relations can be improved using the findings of such researches (10). This requires examining the effectiveness of models that have been repeatedly proposed by experts. Evaluating the mentioned models for different statistical populations can provide the conditions for the professionals whose target community includes couples and families to present more practical and effective models based on their needs (11).

While a great number of studies have been dedicated to investigating the application of marital relationship enrichment methods, almost no study has been carried out on analyzing the components of enriching couples' relationships. The studies conducted in this regard have mostly investigated one approach or have compared different approaches to couple enrichment. Therefore, each of the theories and models presented for enriching couples' relationships has been formulated in accordance with its own theoretical foundations and specific explanations of the relationship. In Iran, no study has been carried out to identify the components of marital relationship enrichment program based on field research and analysis of written texts. Moreover, in Iran, marriage and family are more important than in Western countries due to certain cultural values. Therefore, efforts to strengthen the family and satisfy the emotional and psychological needs of family

members, especially spouses are more important. Furthermore, due to the important role of family in Iranian culture, the existence of problems, conflict, and ultimately degradation of the family can have adverse effects for couples, children, family, and society. Besides, if couples acquire communication skills, they can solve a great number of problems in their lives and have a more enjoyable life. In this regard, and to help couples, educational programs have been used, since these programs can improve marital relationships and reduce dissatisfaction among couples. Accordingly, the present study aimed to analyze the components of marital relationship enrichment program and attempted to find the answer to the following question: What are the components of marital relationship enrichment program?

## Methods

The present study was conducted to analyze the components of marital relationship enrichment program using a qualitative method based on deductive content analysis. Testing the previous theories under the new conditions is the most appropriate way to conduct scientific researches (12). The statistical population included all articles, books, and theses in the field of enriching the marital relationship. The databases used in this research were Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Elsevier, Springer, Emerald, Sage, EBSCO, Taylor & Francis, and SID. In the present study, 46 related sources (13 books, 30 papers, and 3 theses) were examined in order to discover and extract the components related to enriching couples' relationship. The inclusion criteria were Iranian and foreign studies being published from 2000 to 2018, studies with qualitative approach, and articles, books and theses in the area of enriching marital relationship. The exclusion criteria were studies with quantitative approach, articles presented in conferences, and repetitive or non-conceptual articles. After selecting the relevant articles, the texts of the articles were investigated in order to extract the appropriate codes. The texts were read aloud. Then, the appropriate codes were written in separate sheets with numbers and letters and the codes were reviewed, merged, categorized, and analyzed. Finally, an initial definition of the concept of marital enrichment was given. To analyze the information, the conventional qualitative content analysis method was used based on Zhang's eight steps. In this method, the use of predefined classes is avoided and the classes and their names are allowed to be extracted from the available data. This method is suitable for revealing hidden or altered dimensions

of the concept (13).

For data analysis, first, the components of marital relationship enrichment program were extracted from 46 written sources. Then, the obtained data were coded, subthemes were extracted, the links between subcategories and categories were created based on content sharing, and main themes were formed accordingly. The components were then carefully examined to check whether or not the presence of each individual component was based on enrichment of marital relationship. The texts of theoretical researches, books, journals, and theses related to the enrichment of marital relationship were the field of research in this study. Sampling was done purposively and continued up to the data saturation point.

## Results

The obtained data were categorized into 52 codes, 21 subthemes, and 5 main themes.

The present study aimed at answering the following question: What are the components of marital

relationship enrichment program? To answer this question, the texts were deductively analyzed to find the components of enriching couples' relationships. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1.

The main themes identified in this study are explained in more details as follows:

### Developing awareness and cognition

The first theme identified in the present study was development of awareness and cognition which included 2 main components: knowing oneself and other as well as clarification of expectations in different aspects. Moreover, 10 subcomponents were identified including finding imago, paying attention to level of self-differentiation, integration, or separation of each couple, getting married with knowledge, individual primary relationships, family map, main family problems, unrevealed mental imagination and its consequences, creating shared values, expressing a wish so that the spouse understands, awareness of childhood development stages.

**Table 1. Main themes, subthemes, and codes obtained from deductive content analysis**

| Main themes                            | Subthemes  | Codes   |
|--|--|---|
| Developing awareness and cognition     | Knowing oneself and other, Clarification of expectations in different aspects  | Finding Imago, Paying attention to level of self-differentiation, integration, or separation of each couple, Getting married with knowledge, Individual primary relationships, Family map, Main family problems, Unrevealed Mental imagination and its consequences, Creating shared values, Expressing a wish so that the spouse understands, Awareness of childhood development stages                      |
| Communication skills                   | Awareness circle, Active and receptive listening, Effective conversation   | Using the knowledge base, Learning speaking skills, Listening actively and intending to understand, Developing effective communication, Self-assertiveness and sympathy skills, Considering a person in the context of the intimate relations, Growth and eloquence   |
| Emotional literacy                     | Logic of love and excitement, Relations and communications, Assurance and encouragement, Discovering new methods of thinking and behavior, Tide of love                        | Familiarity with communication styles, Emotional control, Exploring thoughts, emotions, and wishes and the way of expressing them, Daily dialogue, Assurance and encouragement, Emotional literature and emotional empowerment, Exploring spouse's emotions and thoughts, Distinguishing emotional-rational and active responses to motivators, Importance of sexual relations, Knowledge of sexual relations |
| Commitment to improve the relationship | Discovering strengths and needs to grow, Nurturing love, Myths and beliefs, Progressing together, Role-based relationships, Understanding spiritual values, Stairs of unsucces | Understanding spouse's inner world, Encouraging funny, friendly and enjoyable activities, Complementing and praising, Sustainable communication, Trust and commitment, Living with values, Traditions and trends, Taking time to be together, Planning to solve problems as a team, Responsibility of a person in life, Role recognition, Spirituality, Listing childhood failures, Reorganizing failures     |
| Conflict resolution skills             | Management of contradiction, Rage control, Problem-solving, Financial management   | Getting informed of tension management, Knowing why and how to struggle, Preparing a list of conflicts, Conflict resolution steps, Reducing past sufferings and healing emotional wounds, Sharing refuses, Managing and controlling anger in a safe place, Exchanging constructive opinions, Shared problem-solving skills, Financial issues and managing them, Preparing a five- year financial plan         |

### Communication skills

The second theme identified in this study was communication skills which included 3 key components: awareness circle, active and receptive listening, and effective conversation. It also involved 7 subcomponents including using the knowledge base, learning speaking skills, listening actively and intending to understand, developing effective communication, self-assertiveness and sympathy skills, considering a person in the context of the intimate relations, and growth and eloquence.

### Emotional literacy

The other theme discovered from the analysis of data was emotional literacy which included 5 main components: logic of love and excitement, relations and communications, assurance and encouragement, discovering new methods of thinking and behavior, and tide of love. The 10 subcomponents related to this theme were familiarity with communication styles, emotional control, exploring thoughts, emotions, and wishes and the way of expressing them, daily dialogue, assurance and encouragement, emotional literature and emotional empowerment, exploring spouse's emotions and thoughts, distinguishing emotional-rational and active responses to motivators, importance of sexual relations, and knowledge of sexual relations.

### Commitment to improve the relationship

The next theme was commitment to improve the relationship with 7 key components: discovering strengths and needs to grow, nurturing love, myths and beliefs, progressing together, role-based relationships, and understanding spiritual values. Moreover, the 14 identified subcomponents were understanding spouse's inner world, encouraging funny, friendly and enjoyable activities, complementing and praising, sustainable communication, trust and commitment, living with values, traditions and trends, taking time to be together, planning to solve problems as a team, responsibility of a person in life, role recognition, spirituality, listing childhood failures, and reorganizing failures.

### Conflict resolution skills

The fifth theme identified in this study was conflict resolution skills which included 4 key components: management of contradiction, rage control, problem-solving, and financial management. It also included 11 subcomponents: getting informed of tension management, knowing why and how to struggle,

preparing a list of conflicts, conflict resolution steps, reducing past sufferings and healing emotional wounds, sharing refuses, managing and controlling anger in a safe place, exchanging constructive opinions, shared problem-solving skills, financial issues and managing them, and preparing a five-year financial plan.

Based on the results, some skills are taught in programs aimed at enriching marital relationships to help satisfy the essential needs of the couples. So far, various theories, models, and approaches have been formulated regarding enriching couples' relationships. Some of the approaches were improving and enriching relations, moving toward educating couples and improving their relationships, visual therapy of relationships, preparation/enrichment program, helping young couples to overcome their problems, developing intimate relation skills among couples, maintaining the marriage before getting married, improving and enriching relations, couples' relationship, aware couples network, structured enrichment, association of couples in enriching marriage, and dealing with marital life. Gottman and Gottman (14) focused on changing behaviors, changing beliefs, deepening the hidden and unconscious meanings of dreams, and a systematic view of the family simultaneously.

The model of helping young couples overcome their problems focused on helping couples learn how to control their conflicts rather than being controlled by their conflicts. The goal of maintaining marriage before getting married was to help couples reach a mutual understanding through self-reinforcement, which was formulated in 8 to 10 sessions. The main idea behind the practical application of intimate relationship skills was to maintain intimacy, which is a prerequisite for maintaining a stable marriage.

preparation/enrichment program aimed to help couples identify the strengths of their relationships and rely on these strengths. It also attempted to help them recognize traumatic aspects of their relationships that needed to be enriched. Teaching couples how to make a more effective relationship in dealing with important issues, solving traumatic problems based on the ten-step paradigm of conflict resolution, discovering key issues using the pair and family diagrams, and determining an applicable financial plan were among the measures to achieve personal, marital, and family goals. In visual communication therapy, emotional healing was achieved and the growth engine restarted and resulted in the restoration of individual integrity. In ten sessions of movement toward educating couples



and improving their relations, couples were taught some skills to accept the responsibility of their behaviors, learn how to encourage each other, identify the factors affecting life, understand their own responsibility, and create a desired relationship. The main goals of the couples' communication program were to make couples more effective in communicating with each other as a result of day-to-day contact, resolve and manage conflicts, and build a lasting and satisfying relationship. Nine skills were included in the goals of improving and enriching relationships. Using these skills led to increasing mutual respect, understanding, collaboration, and care (15).

In this regard, it is necessary to identify the couples' needs for growth and enrichment, prevention, or treatment services. For example, if couples have problems with not knowing each other and this problem is more related to their past experiences and relationships, the Imago, Pierce and Symbis approaches are more effective. If they are having a problem with conflict resolution skills, CC and Olson approaches are more effective (15).

## Discussion

The present study was conducted using a qualitative approach based on deductive content analysis and aimed to analyze the components of marital relationship enrichment program. In this section, the research question is discussed.

The first main theme was developing awareness and cognition which focused on the strengths in couples' relationships. In a case study using visual communication therapy, Ostovar, et al. reported that getting informed of childhood developmental stages, how parents interact, childhood wounds, and healing the wounds were the main themes (16). Dargahi et al. (13) pointed to the expansion of personal awareness, the balance of family roles, and the transformation of the overall family structure. Hasankhani et al. also (17) focused on increasing couples' knowledge of each other. The results of the study by Schofield et al. (18) demonstrated that knowledge of the unconscious aspects of relationships, early relationships of a person with parents, and its effect on marital relationship were very important. Moreover, the need to complete unfinished stages of childhood, healing emotional wounds, and turning marriage and unconscious relationship into conscious marriage were other important themes identified in their study. Wegner et al. stated that independent cognition and thinking processes of the individual were very important in the relationship between couples (19). Other studies

like those conducted by Dattilio et al. (20) and Ussher and Perz (21) reported that cognitive-behavioral therapy can affect the group and couple relationship (20, 21). Based on the results of the present study and those of other relevant studies, it can be concluded that self-awareness and cognition can affect one's behavior and relationship with the opposite sex and spouse.

The second main theme of this study indicated that communication skills can affect enriching marital relationship. Pirsaghi et al. (22) investigated the effective ways to communicate and improve communication and maintain the quality of the relationship over time. Furthermore, Navidian et al. (23) developed a preventive intervention program for couples by helping young couples overcome their problems. Davis' Chelsi. (24) reported that relatively satisfied couples engaged in more positive and more effective communication and there was an association between reliable communication-to-satisfaction and satisfaction-to-communication in couples' lives. The results of the studies by Zaheri et al. (25) and Pakravan et al. (26) revealed that communication skills were the most important factors for survival, stability, and growth of family. Unfamiliarity with communication skills and inability to solve harmful family interactions were among the important factors of marital dissatisfaction.

The third main theme of this study was emotional literacy. Emotional literacy is a measure of one's ability to avoid automatic adherence to emotions and is indicative of the level of self-differentiation. Its main purpose is to balance emotions and cognition so that couples can experience emotional intimacy through successful communication and negotiation, define and redefine their relationship, and mutually share their understanding of the relationship. In explaining this finding, Zaheri et al. (25), Horn et al. (27), and Van pelt et al. (28) emphasized increasing interpersonal intimate relations, experience and sincere expression of sympathy, understanding and accepting self and others, logic of love and excitement, aligned relationships and interactions, encouragement and praise, familiarity with communication styles, discovering new methods of thought and behavior, importance of sexual relation, and love tide. Randles et al. (29) emphasized realistic expectations and sexual expectations. Couples learn to distinguish emotional, rational, and active responses to stimuli, explore and express thoughts, feelings, and desires, make daily conversation, encourage and assure, use

emotional literature and emotional empowerment, and explore feelings and thoughts of the spouse.

Commitment to improve the relationship was the fourth main theme of the study. Couples enhance knowledge of how beliefs, feelings, and goals influence communication. Martinez et al. (30) pointed to developing right expectations of marriage, discussing how to write a new role, and debunking irrational beliefs using marriage consolidation approach. In explaining this finding, Khalesi (31) introduced a skill/learning program for nurturing and strengthening couples to prevent, treat, and enhance their relationships. Daneshpour et al. (32), Fatima et al. (33), Gottman (14), Cheraghi et al. (34), and Timothy et al. (35) stated that communication as a major factor of marital satisfaction varied between genders. The strongest predictor of marital satisfaction was their relationship with the spouse for both genders, especially for women. Moreover, Timothy et al (35) reported that a good and effective communication can make a healthy relationship.

The fifth main theme was conflict resolution skills. The couples choose the process to deal with problems by learning communication styles and conflict resolution styles. Conscious changing of style can help change this process. By consciously changing their style, couples can change this process. Based on the study by Cheraghi, et al. couples can act constructively rather than passively or responsively and use positive approaches instead of negative ones by reducing past sufferings and healing emotional wounds, sharing refuses, exchanging constructive opinions, managing anger, and learning problem-solving skills (34). Besides, Timothy et al. reported that problem-solving skills affect satisfaction in the couples' relationship (35). Acitelli reported that when partners or couples in a relationship think or talk about their relationship, they can solve their problems and this creates an awareness of the relationship (36). Therefore, focusing on problem-solving trainings after marriage can be an appropriate strategy to enhance marital satisfaction and reduce psychological

symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and interpersonal sensitivity(25).

As expected, since this study was not limited to quantitative methods, it was made possible to identify significant factors influencing previously neglected in marital relationship enrichment programs. It is recommended that future researches be carried out based on structural relationship of factors affecting the marital enrichment of Iranian couples. It is also suggested that in future research, in addition to qualitative methods, quantitative and mixed methods be used to collect information. One of the limitations of the present study was the lack of previous research on the factors influencing marital relationship enrichment. Moreover, the findings cannot be generalized to other settings due to the qualitative nature of the study.

### Conclusion

The result of the present qualitative study showed that five main themes of the analysis of marital relationship enrichment program were developing awareness and cognition, communication skills, emotional literacy, commitment to improve the relationship, and conflict resolution skills. Qualitative researches do not claim to generalize their results to a larger community. Therefore, the researchers of the present study sought to take a close look at the subject through their point of view. The findings of this study can provide the necessary context for enriching couples' relationships and having a successful marriage. It is suggested to use quantitative methods as well as mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) in future studies to gather information.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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