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The Effectiveness of Unified Transdiagnostic Treatment on the Internalized Problems of Children with Emotional Divorced Parents

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Extended Abstract

Aim

The family is the most fundamental institution, leaving lasting cultural and social impacts on its members. It significantly shapes individuals' attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors (Amato & Kane, 2011). Although people rarely start families expecting their relationships to end, recent reports indicate that 42% of marriages in England and 46% in the United States result in divorce (Millings et al., 2020). Notably, official divorce statistics do not fully capture the extent of marital breakdowns; beyond legal divorces, a substantial portion of couples experience emotional divorce or separation. In such cases, couples live together in silence and detachment, refraining from pursuing a formal divorce (Bukharai, 2013).

The family is also where children first learn many essential skills, traits, and abilities. Parents, as the primary pillars of the family, foster their children's psychological development by providing a safe and healthy environment. However, parental conflict can weaken family functioning, which may increase the likelihood of behavioral problems in children (Li et al., 2015). This research aims to investigate the effectiveness of an integrated meta-diagnostic protocol for emotional disorders in reducing internalized behavioral issues in children affected by emotional divorce.

Methodology

The research was conducted using a quasi-experimental method with a pre-test, post-test, and one-month follow-up design, including a control group. The study population included all children aged 8 to 12 experiencing parental emotional divorce who visited comprehensive health centers in Shahreza County in the year 2021-2022. From this group, 30 children (18 girls and 12 boys) whose mothers scored above the threshold on the Gottman Emotional Divorce Questionnaire (Gottman, 1998) were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups after completing pre-test questionnaires. The research tools included the Gottman Emotional Divorce Scale (GEDS) and the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach, 1991). The experimental group underwent a transdiagnostic, integrated treatment for emotional disorders (Barlow et al., 2011; Farchione et al., 2012) across fifteen sessions. Data analysis was performed using the SPSS software and the multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) method.

Findings

The results indicated that the internalizing problem scores in the treatment group were significantly lower in both the post-test and follow-up stages compared to the control group ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, these effects remained stable during the follow-up phase. Based on the findings, it can be

concluded that transdiagnostic treatment for emotional disorders not only reduces internalizing behavioral problems in children but also sustains these improvements over time.

Conclusion

The techniques used in this approach target underlying issues that contribute to emotional disorders (Marchette & Weisz, 2017). Anxiety and depressive disorders share common genetic, neurological, and environmental risk factors (Willamoska et al., 2010) and often co-occur or follow one another closely. A child exhibiting one emotional disorder is likely to experience additional emotional disorders or be at a heightened risk of developing them in the future (Leyfer et al., 2013; Cummings et al., 2014). In this treatment, therapists help patients identify emotional patterns and maladaptive behaviors stemming from these emotions, working to change their current emotional response patterns. Additionally, clients are guided to increase their emotional tolerance and manage emotions more effectively after recognizing them. In exposure exercises, the focus is on experiencing and tolerating emotional responses. A unique feature of the meta-diagnostic integrated protocol is its emphasis on positive emotions as part of the treatment process (Farchione et al., 2012; Ellard et al., 2010). These findings highlight the importance of addressing the psychological needs of affected children and suggest that similar interventions could improve their emotional and psychological well-being. Implementing such treatment programs in health and educational centers is recommended to enhance the psychological status of children in similar situations.

Keywords: Emotional Divorce, Internalized Behavioral Problems, Meta-Diagnostic Treatment.

Ethical Considerations

To comply with ethical standards, parental consent was obtained for participation in the intervention program, and parents were fully informed about all stages of the intervention. Parents of the control group were also assured they would receive these interventions after the research process was complete. Confidentiality was maintained for all participants in both groups.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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