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The Effect of Acceptance and Commitment Group Therapy on the Psychological Well-being and Happiness of Children of Divorce

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Extended Abstract

Aim

As a fundamental building block of society, the family plays a crucial role in the development and well-being of humankind (Harper & Snowden, 2017). In recent years, divorce rates have risen in many countries, including Iran. This phenomenon has various personal and social consequences for family members and can also significantly affect children's mental health (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019). One area impacted by parental divorce is children's happiness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), which comprises three core components: positive emotions, life satisfaction, and the absence of negative emotions (Argyle, Martin, & Lu, 1995).

Children's psychological well-being is another aspect deeply influenced by family issues and parental divorce. According to Ryff (2014), psychological well-being includes six components: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) claims to enhance individuals' quality of life (Lee et al., 2021). Given its focus on acceptance and personal growth in navigating crises, ACT appears suitable for addressing issues arising from divorce. This research aims to examine the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Group Therapy on the psychological well-being and happiness of children of divorced parents.

Methodology

This study is applied in purpose and utilizes a quasi-experimental design, featuring a pre-test, post-test, and a control group, along with a two-month follow-up phase. The research population consists of teenagers aged 13 to 17 from divorced families with access to social networks in Iran in 2022. According to Delavar's (2018) guidelines, a minimum of 15 subjects per group is recommended for intervention studies to ensure adequate sample size. Accordingly, both the control and experimental groups were set at 40 individuals to allow for potential dropouts and were selected through convenience sampling.

Inclusion criteria included an age range of 13 to 17, a minimum of six months since parental divorce, absence of severe physical or mental disorders, no psychiatric medication use, and willingness and informed consent from both the participants and their parents. Exclusion criteria included suicidal thoughts or attempts, presence of psychotic symptoms, missing more than two sessions, withdrawal of consent, and concurrent engagement in pharmacological or psychological therapies.

The experimental group underwent Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Turrell, Bell, & Wilson, 2016). in a group format for eight sessions. The study utilized the Ryff Scale of Psychological Well-Being (RSPWB) (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) and the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHI) (Argyle et al., 1989) as the assessment tools.

Therapy sessions were held weekly, each lasting 90 minutes, in two online groups of seven and eight participants from the experimental group, using the Skyroom virtual platform. At the end of the study, a practical therapy session was provided to participants in the control group.

The mixed variance analysis test with repeated measures was conducted using SPSS version 26 for data analysis.

Findings

The results of the mixed variance test and calculated F coefficients indicated that the factor of time or assessment stage had a significant effect on the psychological well-being and happiness scores of children from divorced families ($p < 0.001$). Additionally, based on the calculated F coefficient, group membership (i.e., Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) significantly impacted the psychological well-being and happiness of these children ($p < 0.001$). Thus, it can be concluded that the type of treatment received had a substantial effect on the treatment group.

The findings also revealed a significant interaction effect between the type of treatment and the time factor on psychological well-being ($F = 10.440$, $B = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$) and happiness ($F = 25.4399$, $B = 0.47$, $p < 0.000$), indicating that the treatment's effectiveness over time accounted for 27% and 47% of the variance in psychological well-being and happiness, respectively. Furthermore, the results showed a significant difference in average scores across the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up stages for both psychological well-being and happiness. This means that Acceptance and Commitment Group Therapy led to meaningful improvements in post-test and follow-up scores compared to pre-test levels. However, no significant difference was found between the post-test and follow-up scores, suggesting that the improvements in psychological well-being and happiness achieved after the intervention were sustained over time.

Conclusion

The study reveals that Acceptance and Commitment Group Therapy positively impacted the psychological well-being of children from divorced families, with effects enduring through the follow-up phase. The intervention protocol emphasized cultivating psychological flexibility, enabling the children to accept emotions related to their parents' divorce without attempting to control or suppress them. By addressing inflexible beliefs and fostering values-based goal-setting, the therapy aimed to enhance the children's ability to navigate emotions associated with their parents' separation. Active engagement with emotions during intervention sessions helped redirect attention from divorce-related concerns, fostering increased psychological flexibility and subsequently improving the children's psychological well-being (Lee et al., 2021).

Moreover, the group dynamics mitigated feelings of isolation and provided a platform for shared experiences among peers. The research also underscores the lasting impact of ACT group therapy on the happiness of children affected by divorce. By fostering a connection with the present moment and promoting metacognitive awareness, the therapy aimed to reduce the intensity of negative thoughts and emotions, thereby enhancing overall happiness (Farb et al., 2018). In conclusion, Acceptance and Commitment Group Therapy proves effective in enhancing the psychological well-being, happiness, and resilience of children affected by divorce. Its emphasis on psychological flexibility, values-driven goal-setting, and group support contributes to lasting positive outcomes, demonstrating the enduring impact of ACT on the well-being of these individuals.

Keywords: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Divorce, Happiness, Psychological Well-being.

Ethical Considerations

All participants and their parents provided verbal consent to participate in the study, and assurances were given regarding the confidentiality of their information. This article is based on a Master's thesis in Clinical Psychology at Allameh Tabataba'i University, completed in 2021, and approved by the Ethics Committee with the code IR.ATU.REC.1400.066.

Author Contributions

The corresponding author managed all stages of the research and is responsible for writing the article.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this study.

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