

# Original Article: Effectiveness of Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT) on Marital Adjustment: A systematic Review

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim:** This study aimed to systematically review the effectiveness of Emotion-focused therapy (EFT) on marital adjustment.

**Materials and method:** This is a descriptive study, and based on the implementation method, it is considered a systematic review. The statistical population included all articles, studies, projects, and research reports in Persian and English concerning the evaluation and results of the effectiveness of emotion focused therapy on marital compatibility (published in reputable journals).

**Results:** After reviewing the articles in the databases, 16 studies that met the inclusion criteria were included. The results of data analysis were categorized and presented in the four axes of emotion-focused therapy and the target community, emotion-oriented therapy and the study variables, emotion-focused therapy, educational-therapeutic strategies, considerations, and suggested strategies.

**Conclusion:** In all studies related to emotion-focused therapy where the main focus of the treatment was marital turmoil, the comparison of adjustment scale scores before and after the treatment of experimental and control groups revealed a significant improvement in marital adjustment.

## Introduction

Marriage is a useful, valuable, structured strategy to meet people's individual needs. A healthy marital relationship is one of the main factors in creating mental health, under which the best individual talents will be flourished. This relationship provides better than any other human relationship, the need for

attachment and security. Marriage and family establishment, besides providing and satisfying emotional, psychological, and sexual needs, can become the center of enhancing healthy and developed generations. However, this is if the relationship between couples and the whole family center is healthy, warm, and without any tension. Any incompatible relationship will lead to the cessation and stagnation of members' improvement which plays a vital role in the

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family, and the unity of spouses is their compatibility with each other.

Marital compatibility is a state where there is general satisfaction feeling and happiness in a couple toward their marriage. Being a wife creates a unique role to the point where the most intimate interactions take place related to the wife [1]. Marital compatibility is a changing process and a set of four aspects of couples' performance in their joint life, as mentioned in the following: (i) Satisfaction with married life, (ii) attachment to joint life, (iii) agreement and consensus in marital life, and (iv) expression of the couple's emotions and feelings in the family domain [2]. This is created through mutual interest, care for each other, acceptance, understanding, and needs satisfaction [3]. On the other hand, marital incompatibility as a prominent risk factor for both physical and mental health has a high prevalence and is among the most frequent primary or secondary concerns reported by those who seek help from mental health professionals. Therefore, the high prevalence of marital turmoil, divorce, and destructive marital conflicts are major risk parameters for many forms of dysfunction and pathology in the family [4]. Many couples face situations or life events that may lead to emotional distress, while attachment events can negatively affect relationship bonding [5]. In addition to causing stagnation in the relationship of couples, marital incompatibility destroys life and harms couples' physical and mental health [6].

Nowadays, couple therapy is one of the main components of medical services, and the spread of marital incompatibilities has made its necessity more evident [7]. One of the effective approaches in couple therapy is emotion-focused therapy. It focuses not only on the negative interactional patterns, but also on the strong negative emotional reactions from disturbed couples. Similarly, the therapist can reconstruct issues and ask the couple to actively participate in treatment and make new forms of verbal communication to maintain a proper and satisfactory relationship [7].

Emotion-focused therapy is one of the effective approaches in couple and family therapies

created to decline communication conflicts and incompatibilities between them. This approach is based on the evident concepts of marital disturbances and adult love and believes that marital incompatibilities are created and continued with a pervasive state of negative emotions and attachment injuries. In this type of therapy, it is assumed that conflict in marital life occurs when spouses cannot satisfy each other's attachment needs for safety, security, and satisfaction. In other words, it indicates the couples failure to establish a relationship with a secure attachment pattern. To fulfill each other's attachment needs, spouses experience secondary emotional responses such as anger, hostility, revenge, or excessive guilt. Furthermore, the secondary emotional responses emerge in aggressive-withdrawal behaviors, which may eventually lead to the (aggression-aggression) or (withdrawal-withdrawal) pattern, based on which emotion couple therapy focuses on their emotional relationship and solves their problems.

Emotion-focused therapy (EFT) was introduced in the 1980s by Sue Johnson and Leslie Greenberg and quickly gained worldwide acceptance. This therapy provides a tool for professionals to minimize conflict by making a safe emotional connection. It has been used in diverse couples, individuals, and families facing various challenges. However, its primary focus has been on couples [8]. Working Group of Branch 12 of the American Psychological Association, which belongs to the Clinical Psychology Community, has defined the criteria for Empirical Supported Therapies (ESTs) in psychotherapy with three degrees of controversial, moderate, and strong. To date, Sue Johnson's -focused couples therapy is the only approach to couples therapy strongly approved in the list of treatments with empirical evidence from the American Psychological Association (APA) [9].

Wood, Crane, Schaalje, and Law (2005) conducted a meta-analysis on various behavioral interventions for couples, including -focused therapy, focusing on the effectiveness of various intensities of marital distress (mild, moderate, and severe). The results of their study revealed that emotion-focused therapy

had indicated better effectiveness in the treatment of moderate marital discord compared with individual behavioral therapy interventions. Emotion-focused couple therapy combines three systematic perspectives, humanism and Bowlb's attachment theory. Concerning the major role of emotion in attachment theory, this therapy refers to the profound role of emotions and relationships in organizing communication patterns and considers emotion as the agent of change. This process leads to the development of safer attachment styles, different patterns of couples' interaction, empathy towards each other's experiences, and more modern interaction patterns. EFT therapists view relationship issues as problems in processing emotional experiences [10]. Specialists of the emotion-focused approach, directly and from the beginning of their work with clients, by helping them in the process of accessing, symbolizing, enhancing, processing, and integrating their emotional experiences in their relationships with others and in their inner dialogues, where they continuously self-define their sense of worth and competence, examine the attachment issue [9, 11, 12].

In this model, it is assumed that the individual emotional experiences of each couple organize the psychological and interpersonal state of the couples in their interactions. The basis of the emotion-oriented treatment method is self-improvement and personal growth, and the primary goal of treatment is an individual balance. The basic hypothesis of this therapy states that until each couple is unable to communicate their attachment needs in the domains of satisfaction and security, marital conflicts will begin to form [13]. This therapy integrates the intrapsychic perspective provided by empirical approaches with an interpersonal systems perspective and uses both types of intervention to aid distressed couples shape emotional access, responsiveness, and engagement [14].

Literature review demonstrates that various studies have addressed the issue of the effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy on marital adjustment and its related components and have reported that this therapy is effective

in promoting marital adjustment [3, (Bitaqsir et al., 2016; Towler and Stuhlmacher, 2013; Hosseinabadi *et al.*, 2013). However, so far, no research has directly investigated the conducted research and reported their results in a coherent and purposeful form. Therefore, it seems that a literature review concerning the effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy on marital adjustment and a critical examination of their results can indicate the status of the subject under investigation and the existing gaps, as well as the necessary measures for future research. Therefore, the recent study aimed to summarize and present the results of previous studies in a logical and orderly classification so that it provides the essential insight into dimensions of emotion-focused therapy and other possible parameters affecting the therapy and the influential components in the effectiveness of therapy for future therapists and researchers.(Momeni, 2022)

### Materials and method

Finding the evidence related to the effectiveness of emotional therapy on marital compatibility started on 01.11.2021 and ended on 30.11.2021. To collect studies published from 1990 to 2021 in the internal databases of Ensani.ir, SID.ir, Elmnet.ir, Magiran.com, Noormags.ir, and ganj.irandoc.ac.ir with keywords such as emotion-focused treatment, emotion-centered therapy, treatment (EFT), emotion-focused approach, emotion-based therapy, marital adjustment, and the effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy on marital adjustment were searched to collect Persian studies. Likewise, to collect studies were investigated that were published in foreign databases, Scopus, Science Direct, Google Scholar, Pub Med, Iceeft.com, Psych info, Oalib.comt, Wiley.com, and proquest.com with keywords such as Emotion Focused Therapy, Emotional Focused Therapy, EFT, EFCT, marital adjustment, marital compatibility and efficacy of emotion-focused therapy on marital adjustment. The criteria for entering this analysis included the following: (i) The subject of the research is to examine the effect of emotion-focused therapy on marital adjustment and its related variables, (ii) the results should

be accessible through reliable sites, (iii) the journal under study should have a high score in terms of ranking, (iv) the underlying study has a proper citation, and (v) the underlying study does not have any serious flaws or weaknesses in terms of methodology. (Momeni *et al.*, 2021)

Exclusion criteria included those studies that were in the form of conference articles or were not following the title and aim of the proposed

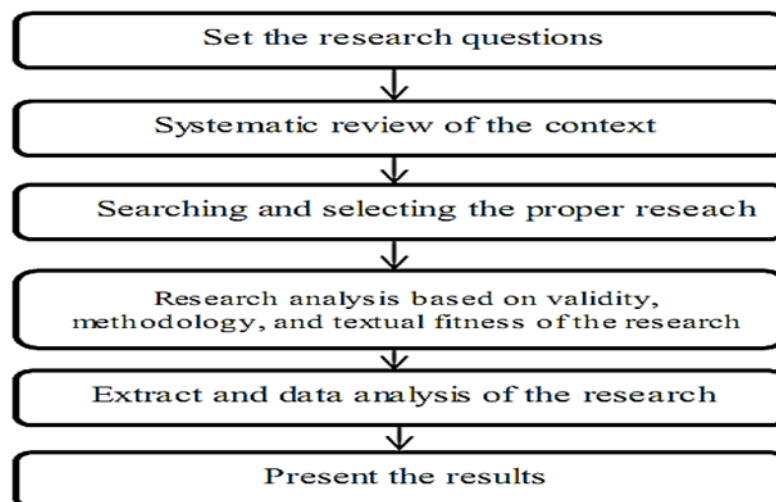
study in terms of methodology. Furthermore, articles that only used the keywords mentioned above in their title and did not adhere to the principles and assumptions of emotion-focused therapy or dimensions of marital adjustment in the research text were excluded from the analysis samples.

The research engines, databases, and searched keywords are listed separately in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Search engines, databases, and keywords

Search engines	Databases		Keywords	
	Persian	English	Persian	English
Google GoogleScholar Yahoo	Elmnet.ir Ensani.ir SID.ir Magiran.com Noormags.ir ganj.irandoc.ac.ir	Scopus Science Direct Pub Med Iceeft.com Psych info Oalib.com proquest.com Wiley.com	Emotion-focused therapy (EFT) therapy Emotion oriented therapy Marital adjustment Efficacy of emotion-focused therapy on marital adjustment	Emotion Focused Therapy Emotional Focused Therapy EFT EFCT marital adjustment marital compatibility Efficacy of emotion-focused therapy on marital adjustment

Moreover, Figure 1 displays the process of searching and refining the underlying studies for analysis.



**Figure 1.** The process of searching and refining the conducted research

## Results and discussion

After searching, screening, and evaluating the quality of performed studies, the final analysis

was carried out on 16 studies, and their results indicated that in all studies, emotion-focused therapy had a positive effect on marital adjustment and was used in different

demographic groups to promote marital compatibility and related dimensions. A summary of studies and their methodological specifications are presented for review, and summarize the results, as listed in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Summary of results in systematic review

Author/Year	Research Methodology	Research sample	Scale	Treatment group	Control group	Interventions and therapeutic considerations	Results
Jolazadeh Esmaili et al. (2021) [6]	A single-case experiment of multiple asynchronous baseline type	6 couples referring to Sina Family Counseling Center, Dezful city, age range 22-45 years old, not seeking a divorce.	marital adjustment scale (DAS) Aron T. depression questionnaire	Subjects were randomly replaced in two groups of couple therapy based on acceptance and commitment and emotion-oriented couple therapy (three couples in each group).	-	Session in the form of treatment protocol based on sources of various studies have been conducted on specialized courses. Couple therapy courses have been done by specialist in the two mentioned approaches.	Emotion-focused couple therapy have been effective in declining the depression symptoms in this couple group.
Vatani, et al. (2019)	Semi-experimental pre-test-post-test type	16 young couples (25-45), Eshnoyeh city	Marital adjustment (DAS) Sexual satisfaction questionnaire Emotional regulation questionnaire of Garnevsy et al. (2001)	8 couples in couples therapy group	8 couples in control group	8 sessions of 90 minutes, focused on training and implementation of exercises in the interval between sessions/the content of the training was not found.	It showed that emotion focused therapy is effective in emotion regulation, sex satisfaction, and marital compatibility in post-test.
Jafari et al. (2017)	Qualitative/quantitative (pre-test-post-test with control group)	30 couples referring to Yara Counseling Center, Saveh city	Intimacy Scale Walker and Thompson (1983) Bagarozzi Intimacy Needs Questionnaire (MINQ)	15 couples in the couples therapy group	15 couples in control group	10 sessions, based on the findings of Islamic and emotion-oriented teachings	The results showed that emotion-focused counseling based on Islamic teachings can increase the intimacy of incompatible couples.
Zangeneh Motlaq et al. (2016) [1]	Semi-experimental with a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up design with a control group	45 couples (20-40 years old) referring to the Counseling Center of Islamic Azad University,	Marital adjustment scale (DAS) Marital Commitment Questionnaire (DCT)	Randomly in two experimental groups Therapy based on acceptance and commitment	15 couples in control group	9 two-hour sessions with a one-month follow-up. Emotion-focused therapy sessions were held based on Johnson's book (2004),	The results showed a significant effect of emotion-focused therapy on increasing marital adjustment at the level of (p<0.001).

		Arak Branch, no addiction, no severe conflict, and the minimum literacy diploma		t and emotion-focused therapy (every 15 couples)		translated by Bahrami <i>et al.</i> (2009)	
Sheidan Far et al. (2016) [18]	Semi-experimental pre-test and post-test with the control group	24 couples referring to Sarai Mahalheh and Counseling in Tehran	Bell's adjustment questionnaire (1961)	12 couples in experimental group	12 couples in control group	10 weekly sessions in pairs for 1.5 hours, the content of the sessions was taken from Johnson's emotion focused couple therapy (2004), quoted by Honarparvaran (2013)	Both emotion-focused couple therapy and imagotherapy affected the individual compatibility of couples ( $p < 0.001$ ).
Akhwan Bitaqsir et al. (2016) [4]	Semi-experimental with a pre-test and post-test design with a control group	30 couples referring to Psychological Counseling and Service Centers, Psychiatric Clinics of Isfahan Province	Enrich Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire Locke-Wallace marital compatibility test	15 couples in experimental group	15 couples in control group	14 training sessions based on Grinman and Johnson method and follow-up after three months	The obtained results revealed that emotion-focused couple therapy is effective on marital satisfaction and compatibility.
Kiani Chalmerdi et al. (2014)		20 couples referring to Foulad Mobarakeh Counseling Center	Revised RDAS Marital Compatibility The revised questionnaire of experiences in close relationships ECR-R	10 couples in experimental group	10 couples in control group	10 sessions based on the designed protocol	Intervention based on attachment dimensions has been effective in increasing marital adjustment.
Najafi et al. (2014) [15]	Semi-experimental and pre-test and post-test design in two control and experimental groups	30 infertile couples with marital incompatibility and dissatisfaction in Kermanshah	Marital adjustment scale (DAS) Short form of WHO's quality of life scale	15 couples in experimental group	15 couples in control group	12 sessions of 120 minutes, 2 times per week for each couple in experimental group based on Johnson's model	Emotion-focused couple therapy training had a significant effect on increasing marital adjustment
Ziaulhaq et al. (2012)	Pre-test and post-test design with control group and follow-up	10 couples referring to three counseling centers in Mashhad, no history of violence and mental disorder and substance abuse	Marital adjustment scale (DAS)	Δcouples in couples therapy group	5 couples in control group	20 sessions of 50 min, twice a week for each couple, the treatment included three steps and nine steps.	The results showed a significant effect of emotion focused therapy on increasing marital adjustment at the level of ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Fallahzadeh <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Pre-test and post-test design with control group and repeated measurement	30 couples living in Tehran, with mild to moderate marital turmoil, living in Tehran	Marital Adjustment Scale (DAS) Attachment Injury Instrument (AIM)	10 couples in emotion focused couple therapy group and 10 couples in the integrated systemic couple therapy group	10 couples in control group once every two weeks	9 sessions of 90 minutes, based on Johnson's (2005) protocol	The results showed a significant difference between emotion emotion-focused couple therapy and integrated systemic couple therapy, and they effectively increased marital compatibility (<0.05). There was no significant difference between the two therapies.
Hassanabadi <i>et al.</i> (2013) [17]	Semi-experimental with pre-test and post-test with control group	all people who, since the 20 <sup>th</sup> of the month for the existence of conflict, went to Private Counseling Centers in Mashhad city to solve their marital problems and interpersonal relationships	Marital adjustment scale (DAS) Positive Feeling Questionnaire for Spouse (PFQ)	12 people underwent 9 sessions of 1.5 hour emotion focused therapy in group and sometimes individually	Self-controlled	No specific strategy and protocol was found. The content of sessions is unclear.	The emotion-focused therapy has been effective in increasing the level of marital adjustment, and a positive attitude toward the spouse has been effective in people with extramarital relationships. In the experimental group, there have been desired results in subscales of satisfaction, solidarity, and expression of marital affection, but no proper effectiveness has been observed in marital agreement scale.
Roshni (2011)	Quasi-experimental study	Individuals referring to Private Counseling Centers and Clinic of Ferdowsi University, Faculty of Psychology	marital Adjustment scale (DAS)	16 people in experimental group (4 couples per group)	8 people in control group	10 sessions of 1-hour treatment, once a week	The results indicate that emotion focused therapy has an effect on marital adjustment.
Hosseini (2011) [19]	Quasi-experimental Pre-test-post-test with one control group and two	Couple referring to Mehr Counseling Center and Soreh	MSI-R Questionnaire Marital adjustment scale (DAS)	16 couples in experimental groups (8 couples per group)	8 couples in control group	8 sessions for 12 weeks and each session lasted for 1 hour	The results of analyzing the research hypotheses showed that couple therapy in

	paired experimental groups	University Counseling Center of Tehran	Bagarozzi's Marital Intimacy Needs Questionnaire (MINQ)				solution and excitement-focused methods is effective in increasing the adjustment of couples; however, among the methods of couple therapy, emotion focused therapy has been more effective in increasing the couple's adjustment.
Soltani et al. (2012)	Quasi-experimental Pre-test-post-test with a control group	14 couples referring to Shiraz Counseling Center	Bagarozzi Intimacy Needs Questionnaire (MINQ)	7 couples in experimental group	7 couples in control group	8-10 session lasted for 2-hour therapy, based on the content of emotion focused therapy	The results revealed that EFCT increased emotional, psychological, sexual, physical, relational, temporal, and intellectual intimacy. Still, there was no significant difference in social-recreational and spiritual intimacy between the two groups.
Goldman et al. (1992)	Quasi-experimental Pre-test-post-test with a control group	42 referring couples	Couple Therapy Alliance Scale (CTAS) Marital adjustment scale (DAS) Conflict resolution scale (CRS)	11 couples in experimental group	11 couples in control group	10 sessions of joint marital therapy with a follow-up period of 4 months	The results indicate a significant effect of emotion focused therapy on marital adjustment and intimacy.
McFi <i>et al.</i> (1995)	Quasi-experimental	۱۵ couples	Couple Therapy Alliance Scale (CTAS) Marital adjustment scale (DAS) Sex History Form (SHF)	15 couples in experimental group	self-controlled	5 expert therapists trained and treated three couples in 10 sessions each	The results showed a significant effect of emotion-focused therapy on marital adjustment and intimacy.

A systematic review of the literature related to the effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy on marital adjustment demonstrates that in all cases, emotion-focused therapy can enhance

marital adjustment in target groups. In the following, the results are systematically explained.



### *Emotional therapy and target population*

Concerning the effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy on marital adjustment has been particularly noteworthy over the last decade. The target population includes normal couples with no addiction, literacy, severe marital conflict or decision to divorce, and no physical illness. And specific psychology to infertile couples [15], couples with attachment damage [16], couples with extra marital affairs [17] and early years of life [18]. In addition, the age range of the target population was 20-45 years old, and available sampling was the predominant sampling method of the underlying studies. The conflict domain and the conflict intensity of the participants' couples are highly significant. In 80% of studies, couples had experienced mild conflict. So far, the effectiveness of -focused therapy on the couple's adaptation to high conflicts (including divorce, addiction, impulsivity, domestic violence) was not investigated. In just one research investigated the effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy on marital adjustment and positive emotions of couples with extra marital relationships, it is not apparent what the meaning of marital adjustment is concerned, and this adjustment indicated how are marriage and positive emotions possible despite the continuation of extra marital relationships? Furthermore, one of the most prominent effective parameters to determine the effectiveness of the treatment approach is paying attention to the client's dynamics (Momeni; Mirzabeigi, 2022) which seems that this part of the characteristics of the target population has not been given the required attention. Hence, it is impossible to accurately extract the cultural and contextual components predicting emotion-oriented treatment and enter them into treatment plans.

### *Emotion-focused therapy and research variables*

The studies have a different situation regarding the investigated variables, the second independent variable, and the method of evaluating the effectiveness. A group of researchers compared emotion-focused therapy with other ones, such as therapy based

on acceptance and commitment [1], integrated systemic couple therapy [16], imagotherapy [18], rational-emotional-behavioral therapy and solution-oriented therapy [19] have been used. The variables examined along with marital adjustment include improving physical and psychological health, marital commitment, marital satisfaction, positive emotions, failure tolerance, marital intimacy, and depression. Among these studies, 5 researchers have also compared the effectiveness of -focused therapy with others, which was explained by the second independent variable. Another notable point for the richness of comparative studies of treatment effectiveness is that each therapist has sufficient mastery over both theoretical and practical domains of the determined approach to evaluate and judge its results more accurately. This is even though in most studies, training or treatment was done by the own person, who may not have the required knowledge or skills to train the concepts or therapist based on determined approaches. Moreover, concerning variables with more emotional weight, including in the conceptual framework of emotion-focused therapy, were less observed.

### *Emotion-focused therapy and training-therapeutic strategies*

Concerning treatment considerations and strategies, some authors have developed and designed a treatment protocol based on various study sources, passing specialized couples therapy courses [6]. Some studies derived from Johnson's emotion-focused couple therapy (2004) were based on the art trainers (1391) [1, 15]. In some studies, no details of training or treatment program were found. The status of conducting sessions varies from two sessions per week to one session per two weeks and from 45 to 120 min. According to evidence of emotion-focused therapy, the treatment protocol is one 45-min session per week, and in special and emergency cases, sometimes two sessions per week can be held. However, in some research [15], treatment sessions are held twice a week, as was compressed. Furthermore, the sessions vary between 8 and 20 sessions for couples; based on the condition of each person,

their treatment sessions may be more or less, while in all studies, treatment sessions for all people are considered the same (8-20 sessions). It is also noticeable that in most studies, the therapeutic or educational features of the sessions and strategies have not been precisely specified [13], while in emotion-focused couple therapy, these two domains are completely different and have their program. Thus, a proper distinction between these two domains was not observable in studies. Likewise, long-term follow-ups to determine the treatment effect have not been done in investigations, so maintaining the treatment results is ambiguous over time. It should also be noted that one of the most significant facets of treatment is to determine the change and treatment processes. However, it is mentioned that there were no change processes and treatment mechanisms in these studies, and only the results of treatment sessions are generally reported. Therefore, it is impossible to investigate and analyze the course of changes and clients' developments via participation in the emotion-focused therapy.

#### *Considerations and suggested strategies*

Concerning therapeutic strategies in examining the effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy, since obtaining unknown emotions and increasing knowledge about emotions to ownership in the future requires more energy, it seems challenging to monitor therapy sessions by treating the subject ineffectively. Hence, parameters such as the skill and personality of the therapist and mastery of the desired therapy can extensively impact the results. Hence, it is suggested to use several therapists to check effectiveness. Concerning the utilized tools and scales, it is better to examine the attachment styles questionnaire in research to clarify the relationship between research components. On demographic features, it is suggested that variables such as gender, lack of education, ethnic and regional characteristics, being in a specific stage of the life cycle, and the state of family conflict should be investigated more specifically. Therefore, it is essential to examine the gender role in impacting the emotional counseling model. In all studies comparing the effectiveness of -

focused therapy with other therapies, two groups had one trainer that may have affected the research results. Hence, it is suggested that at least the trainer is different to control the attention and bias of the therapist and researcher in the training and research process.

Finally, it is suggested to compare the effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy on couples with EFIT, and EFCT approaches in future research; that is, couples who come for treatment individually and couples who come for treatment as a couple. Likewise, the effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy, and its training should be compared. Consequently, the effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy in group and individual therapy should also be compared and evaluated.

#### **Conclusion**

In the present research, 16 studies were examined, and the results indicated the effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy on marital adjustment. In the same vein, Johnson *et al.* (1999) argued that in all studies related to emotion-focused couple therapy, where the main focus of treatment was marital turmoil, comparing adjustment scale scores before and after treatment of the experimental and control groups showed a significant improvement in marital adjustment, and that not only emotional couple therapy is effective in declining marital turmoil, but also it seems that couples are willing to continue the healing process even after therapy termination. However, examining different demographic variables, long-term studies, use of expert therapists, and paying more profound attention to change processes and therapeutic processes and couple components predicting the success of emotion-oriented therapy seem essential in future studies of the effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy on marital adjustment.

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