

# Effect of Transactional Analysis Training on Communication Skills and Attribution Beliefs of Incompatible Women

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## Abstract

**Background:** The recent problems of couples necessitate the greater focus of research in this field on relationships between couples. The present study aimed to investigate the effect of transactional analysis training on communication skills and attribution beliefs of incompatible women in Tehran, Iran.

**Methods:** The research method was quasi-experimental. The research population included all incompatible women who were referred to the psychological clinics of district 1 of Tehran, Iran in 2020. Thirty women were selected as the sample using convenience sampling and randomly divided into experimental and control groups (n=15 in each group). The experimental group underwent eight sessions (60-minutes sessions per week) of transactional analysis training. The follow-up was performed after 60 days. The research instruments included the Communication Skills Questionnaire, the Relationship Attribution Measure, and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale. Data analysis was conducted using repeated-measures ANOVA by SPSS software version 24.0.

**Results:** The mean± SD of the post-test scores of communication skills and attribution beliefs of incompatible women was (115.93±8.40) and (85.33±13.40) in the experimental group and (87.93±8.53) and (113.23±12.53) in the control group. The results showed that transactional analysis training effectively and persistently improves communication skills and attribution beliefs of incompatible women (P<0.001).

**Conclusion:** Transactional analysis training can be recommended as an intervention to improve the quality of life of families with compatibility problems.

**Keywords:** Transactional Analysis, Communication, Attribution, Adaptation, Women

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## 1. Introduction

Marriage is considered the most intimate relationship in adulthood that can be the main source of emotion and support for people (1). Marriage is a social phenomenon that has communication as its both basis and product. The main prerequisite for a healthy society is family health, and the health of a family depends on the mental health and effective communication of its members. As a result, improving the mental health and communication skills of families can bring positive social outcomes (2, 3).

The increasing rate of divorce and conflicts between couples has motivated researchers to identify the factors

causing marital conflicts and propose a solution to reduce them. The lack of marital compatibility is one of the main causes of divorce (4). Marital compatibility is defined as the objective feeling of satisfaction and pleasure experienced by the couples as well as a positive and enjoyable attitude towards all aspects of marital relationships (5, 6). According to Spanier's theory, the four dimensions of marital compatibility are satisfaction, solidarity (extent of participation in joint activities), agreement (on issues related to marital relationships such as financial affairs and parenting styles), and expression of love (7). Marital conflicts and disagreements can be followed by detrimental consequences. Poor

communication skills in dealing with life issues are the main cause of marital disputes. Many people cannot properly deal with problems and exhibit signs of depression, anxiety, and anger in such situations. These problems are considered the root of many social ills (7). Communication skills help people correctly express their emotions and needs and succeed in achieving interpersonal goals (8).

Studies have shown that many factors can increase marital satisfaction, such as the sense of companionship (9), trust and love (10), intimacy and avoidance of hostile control (11), communication and expression of interest and empathy (12), understanding emotions and their origins (13), and proper management of emotions (14). Unconditional attentiveness without prejudice is the most effective way to understand the other party in a relationship. The development of empathy skills enables couples to listen to and empathize with each other and makes it possible for the empathizer to connect more deeply with the experience of and easily accept the views of the other party (15, 16). In addition to active listening and retelling, other technique, such as role reversal, are used to increase empathy between couples. When couples play the opposite roles, they will have greater empathy for each other (17). Refahi and Moghtaderi (18) showed that group empathy skills training can significantly increase intimacy between couples, which is one of the pillars of marital satisfaction.

Another factor that affects marital compatibility and, thereby, marital satisfaction, is negotiation skill. Negotiation is the art of reaching a mutual understanding through bargaining and arguing over key points. In this process, people with different stances try to reach an agreement. Negotiation is a type of communication that requires special skills. The basic rules of negotiation are accepting the conflicts and disagreements, seeking a win-win agreement, and being flexible (19). Problem-solving training can be an effective way to reduce marital conflicts and increase marital satisfaction. Problem-solving is a treatment method in which one learns how to use one's effective cognitive skills to cope with problematic interpersonal situations. This method can also raise people's self-efficacy and self-sufficiency (20).

Relationship attributions are also among the factors affecting the quality of emotional relationships. Relationship attributions consist of two constructs: causal attributions that refer to the retrospective

explanation of outcomes of behavior and responsibility attributions that is related to responsibility or accountability for an event (21). Durtschi and colleagues (22) stated that marital behaviors and patterns of marriage and divorce are influenced by attribution models. Attribution refers to an explanation individual provide for the status of their relationships. One's attributions can affect how they feel about their spouse; positive attributions can cause happiness and computability, whereas negative attributions can be problematic for couples. According to the attribution theory, if the behaviors of couples are considered a function of their attribution patterns, we can better understand the process of divorce and marriage (23). Considering the role of attributions in marital satisfaction, it can be stated that attributions predict changes in marital relationships. In addition, there is a one-way relationship between attributions and marital satisfaction, as only attributions can influence marital satisfaction (24).

Humans are constantly looking for the cause of their behavior and that of others, either consciously or unconsciously. The pattern of attributions affects how a person understands and reacts to an event. Since interaction is an integral part of marital relationships, marital compatibility is one of the factors that can ensure the success of family relationships. Compatible people find effective and useful ways to deal with environmental and social stresses, whereas those with computability problems usually select incorrect ways of coping. There are generally differences between men and women in sources of stress and coping strategies. For example, most women suffer from the stress of communicating with others (25).

Couples may be exposed to a variety of sources of anxiety and stress in their lives, which may become more severe and sometimes unbearable over time (26). The increasing rate of divorce and marital incompatibility, on the one hand, and the demand of couples to improve marital relations, on the other hand, show that couples need to receive specialized interventions and training courses in this field. However, there are a variety of models and programs to improve communication skills and attributions, marital satisfaction, and family communication patterns. Based on their philosophy and attitude towards humans and family, these models and programs include special treatments and educational methods (27, 28). Transactional analysis is a way to improve marital relationships. Transactional analysis is a

psychoanalytic theory and method of therapy that focuses on interpersonal relationships and interactions and the course of life events and proposes practical solutions to interpersonal issues. Transactional analysis is basically a theory-based on the assumption that interpersonal exchanges and interactions account for much of our lives (29, 30). Zargar and co-workers (31) showed that transactional analysis training can affect the marital satisfaction of women and Rezaeifar and colleagues (32) reported that transactional analysis training can improve sexual satisfaction and marital intimacy. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the effect of transactional analysis training on communication skills and attribution beliefs of incompatible women in Tehran.

## 2. Methods

The study was quasi-experimental, with a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up design and a control group. The statistical population included all incompatible women who were referred to the psychological clinics of district 1 of Tehran, Iran in 2020. The inclusion criteria included: age range between 20 and 50 years, have at least a high school level, getting a score lower than mean in the dyadic adjustment scale, and written consent to participate in the intervention program. The exclusion criteria included: absence of more than two sessions from treatment, using alcohol and addictive drugs. Thirty women who were willing to participate in the research were selected as the sample using convenience sampling and randomly divided into experimental and

control groups. We included 15 incompatible women in each group by use of G\*power software ( $\rho=1.7$ ,  $1-\beta=0.95$ , and  $\alpha=0.05$ ) (33). Randomization was done by the researcher after obtaining participants' consent and participants were assigned to the groups by a coin-throwing method. After selecting the sample, a pre-test was performed for the experimental and control groups. The experimental group received eight sessions (60- minutes sessions per week) of transactional analysis training while the control group did not receive any training. Table 1 presents a summary of the training sessions. After the intervention program, the post-test was done in the experimental and control groups under the same conditions. The follow-up was done in the experimental and control groups after 60 days.

### Research instruments

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS): The Dyadic Adjustment Scale designed by Spanier in 1976 and measures global marital adjustment (34). It is a 32-item scale to measure the quality of marital relations, which includes dimensions of marital satisfaction (10 items), mutual solidarity (5 items), mutual agreement (13 items), and expression of love (4 items). All items are scored on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 0 to 5, except for items 23 and 24, which is scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 to 4. Different scoring was used for these items and the total score ranged between 0 and 158. The higher the score, the better the adjustment between couples and vice versa (35). The content validity of the

**Table 1:** A summary of transactional analysis training program

Session	Content
1	Introduction, setting communication with members, completion and collection of research questionnaires, description of concepts of basic constructive analysis, i.e., parent, adult, and child, and concepts of basic functional analysis, i.e., "helpful/critical and controlling parent", "adult", and "normal/adaptive child" and their positive and negative aspects, familiarity with verbal and non-verbal clues of M and Egogram states, homework assignment.
2	Review of the previous session, description of concepts such as rejection, permanent parent, permanent adult, permanent child, child-contaminated adult, adult-contaminated child, double contamination, and removal or expel, homework assignment.
3	Review of the previous session, description of concepts such as interrelationship, complementary interrelationship, cross relationship, complex Interrelationship, and angled interrelationship (examples and figures are provided), homework assignment.
4	Review of the previous session, description of the concept of caress and its significance in marital life, introduction of different types of caress, homework assignment.
5	Review of the previous session, familiarity with the development of life script, the necessity of getting rid of unfavorable life script and deciding about the current place and time by the "adult", the four situations of life, the process of their emergence, their effects on our lives, and their corresponding life scripts were described, homework assignment.
6	Review of the previous session, decryption of deterrents and impellent and their effects on relationships.
7	Review of the previous session, introducing mental plays, examples from mental plays, and their roles in relationships, introducing the Karpman drama triangle and describing the concept of time organizing.
8	Familiarity with the concept of unified adult, providing solutions to increase intimacy, emphasizing the application of concepts in life and generalizing them to real areas of life, distributing and re-completing questionnaires, asking and answering questions, discussing and concluding the whole sessions, termination of the training.

**Table 2:** Mean, standard deviation, and between and within-group difference of the research variable in experimental and control groups

Variables	Groups	M ± SD (pre-test)	M ± SD (post-test)	M ± SD (follow-up)	P (time)	P (group)	P (time*group)
Communication skills	Experimental	87.18 ± 8.87	115.93 ± 8.40	114.66 ± 8.46	P<0.001	P<0.001	P<0.001
	Control	87.13 ± 9.14	87.93 ± 8.53	88.00 ± 9.00	0.864		
Attribution beliefs	Experimental	112.80 ± 10.14	85.33 ± 13.40	86.13 ± 11.46	P<0.001	P<0.001	P<0.001
	Control	111.40 ± 11.56	113.23 ± 12.53	113.87 ± 11.12	0.430		

DAS in Persian was examined. This scale has shown its validity for the study groups by distinguishing between married and divorced couples in each question. This scale has concurrent validity and is correlated with the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT) (36). In order to determine the face validity of the scale, this questionnaire was provided to fourteen experts and by removing the ambiguities of the components of this scale, so that it is understandable for the respondents, the 32-item form was approved. The content validity ratio (CVR) and content validity index (CVI) of this scale were reported to be 0.92 and 0.89, respectively (37). In a study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated to be 0.85.

The Jarabak Communication Skills Questionnaire: Jarabak communication skills questionnaire was employed in this study to assess women's communication skills. This questionnaire consists of 34 items that are scored based on a five-point Likert scale (from never to always). Baniyadi and colleagues (38) reported an alpha Cronbach coefficient of 0.84 for the questionnaire. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.82.

The Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM): This questionnaire was developed by Fincham and Bradbury (39) to measure the communicative attributions of couples. This 28-item questionnaire evaluates communication attributions in 7 dimensions. The items are scored based on a six-point Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 6 (totally agree). The minimum and maximum scores on this questionnaire are 28 and 168, respectively, and higher scores indicate higher levels of

attribution problems. Sobouhi and co-workers translated this questionnaire into Farsi and assessed some of its psychometric features (40). Bahrami and colleagues (41) evaluated its reliability as 0.92. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.88 for the questionnaire.

### Statistical analyses

Data were analyzed by descriptive and inferential statistics, including the mean, standard deviation, and repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA). The Bonferroni post hoc test was performed to investigate the difference between the means of communication skills and attribution beliefs of incompatible women among the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up. SPSS version 24.0 was used to analyze the data.

### 3. Results

The participants included 30 incompatible women. According to the demographic characteristics of participants, the mean age of women in the experimental group was 43.65±6.85 years, whereas the control group was aged 44.87±6.79 years. Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation (SD) of the research variable in the experimental and control groups. The mean post-test scores of the communication skills in the experimental group (115.93 ± 8.40) have increased compared to the pre-test (87.18 ± 8.87) and the control group (87.93 ± 8.53).

**Table 3:** Bonferroni post hoc test for pairwise comparison of the communication skills and attribution beliefs in time series in the experimental group

Variable	Phase A	Phase B	Mean difference (A-B)	SE	P value
Communication skills	Pre-test	Post-test	-14.800	1.045	P<0.001
		Follow-up	-14.200	1.172	P<0.001
	Post-test	Follow-up	0.600	0.280	0.123
Attribution beliefs	Pre-test	Post-test	12.933	0.497	P<0.001
		Follow-up	12.367	0.692	P<0.001
	Post-test	Follow-up	0.567	0.330	0.292

SE: Standard error

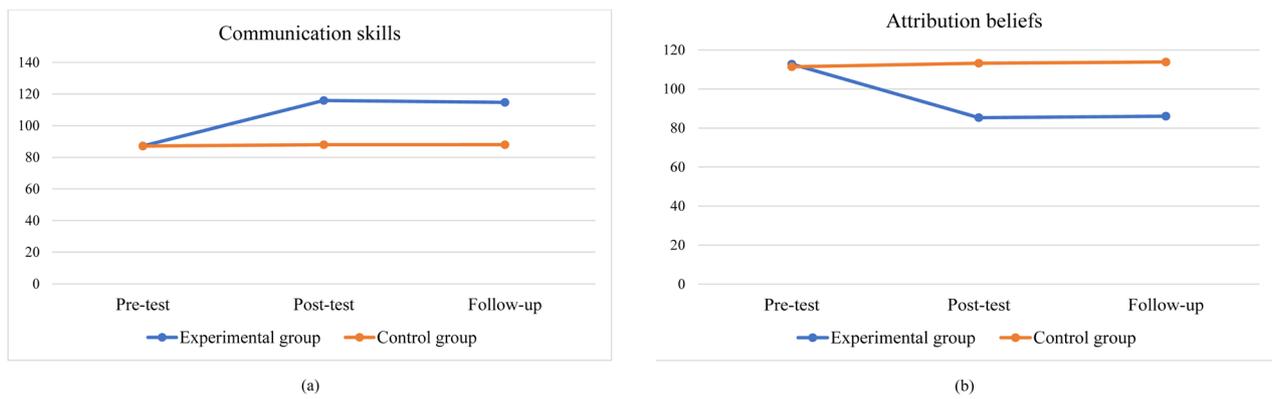


Figure 1: The figure shows the mean comparison of communication skills (a) and attribution beliefs (b) scores between the two groups in the pre-test, post-test and follow-up phases.

According to Table 2, the effect of time on communication skills and attribution beliefs ( $P < 0.001$ ) was significant. Moreover, the results of repeated measurement analysis on the effect of the group indicated that there was a significant difference in communication skills and attribution beliefs ( $P < 0.001$ ). According to the results, the interaction of time and group on communication skills and attribution beliefs was also significant ( $P < 0.001$ ) (Table 2).

Pairwise comparisons were used to compare pre-test, post-test, and follow-up results (Table 3). The results showed that there was a significant difference between pre-test and post-test mean values and also between pre-test and follow-up mean values of communication skills and attribution beliefs. Accordingly, the post-test and follow-up mean scores of communication skills and attribution beliefs were significantly higher than those of the pre-test ( $P < 0.001$ ). However, there was no significant difference between the post-test and follow-up results, indicating the stability of the intervention effects until the follow-up period. It can be hence concluded that transactional analysis training had lasting positive effects on the communication skills and attribution beliefs of incompatible women (Table 3). Changes in the trend of research variables in the pre-test, post-test and follow-up stages are shown in Figure 1 (a) and (b).

#### 4. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the effects of transactional analysis training on communication skills and attribution beliefs of incompatible women in Tehran, Iran in 2020. The first research finding indicated that transactional analysis training had lasting positive effects on the communication skills of incompatible women until the follow-up period. This finding is

consistent with the research results of Torkaman and colleagues (29) and Lawrence (42). Transactional analysis is a psychological approach that promotes and enhances the personality structure of adults and helps them live the moment, achieve cognitive and emotional awareness, and improve their communication and problem-solving skills. Correct understanding of emotions and empathy, receiving childish or parental messages and their hidden meanings, non-involvement in different levels of mental plays, and deep insights gained from personal and interpersonal perceptions direct individuals towards effective negotiation, problem-solving, and healthy and logical relationships. This also enhances their communication skills (16). Intimacy is one of the sides of the love triangle and the emotional element of a relationship that includes warmth, loving communication, expression of interest in the other party's health, and a desire for interaction with the other party (8).

"Intimate relationships" is one of the emotional needs of couples and an important source of happiness, sense of meaning, and marital satisfaction. Intimate marital relationships have been conceptualized as a very important behavioral model that consists of strong emotional and social aspects and is formed based on acceptance, satisfaction, and love. Intimacy is defined as closeness, similarity, and a personal romantic or emotional relationship with another person that requires deep knowledge and understanding of the other party to express thoughts and feelings that are used as a source of similarity and closeness (43). Family therapists argue that intimacy recognition means being aware of the diversity in family structures. Hence, they try to consider the intimate relationship of individuals in their families to solve the problems of couples and help them increase their intimacy during the therapy. Tavakolizadeh and co-

workers (44) showed that communication skills training can effectively reduce the rate of divorce and increase intimacy between couples. The couples who take advantage of effective communication skills experience fewer conflicts and a more intimate relationship. It is also possible to improve the well-being of couples by asking them to change their lifestyle and engage in positive activities, such as kind deeds, appreciation, or optimism. Lyubomirsky and colleagues (45) reported that people can increase their sense of happiness through simple and deliberate positive activities such as expressing gratitude or kindness. Transactional analysis training possibly helps couples to find each other's child egos under their adult egos, caress each other, and feel greater intimacy. Lawrence (42) showed that transactional analysis training improved communication skills and criticism methods of couples because couples found that they should first caress their spouse's child ego and talk about their goodness and then start a frank and bold conversation as an adult ego, talk about their feelings, and address each other's adult egos, instead of discussing the defects and shortcomings.

The study findings also indicated that transactional analysis training significantly and persistently affected the communicative attributions of incompatible women. Two major tasks in social interactions are to shape people's perceptions of each other and to understand the meaning and causes of people's behaviors. Since such meanings are often not tangible, we need to use the methods that lead to the inference and interpretation of the causes in order to achieve them. Researchers argue that we face two issues in deciding about the causes of behaviors:

- 1- determining the causal antecedents of actions and
- 2- proving the intent of the perpetrator.

The causal antecedents of some actions may be internal. If the causal antecedent is internal, it should be then decided whether or not an action is intentional. We are constantly making such careless judgments in our daily lives. The study of the attribution process is one of the central topics in social psychology that aims to clarify what rules we use and what mistakes we make in our attempts to interpret behavior (24). Among the psychological factors influencing marital relationships, Fincham and Bradbury (39) mainly focus on spouse's attributions to causes of each other's behavior. Their studies showed that couples who are interested in

labeling and negative attributes, such as immutable behaviors instead of transient and situational ones, who are called distress maintainers, experience more conflicts and marital boredom. Negative attributions put people in a position of defense and prejudice and increase their willingness to obsessively repeat their life scripts. Since transactional analysis training persistently affected the communicative attributions of incompatible women, it can be stated that understanding life script and engaging in mental plays help people to less return to their childhood conditions in stressful situations and try to solve the problems with their adult ego. In this case, they will be less influenced by distorted perceptions of the child-parent contamination.

The main research limitation was the use of a non-random sampling method. Moreover, it was not possible to match the participants in terms of age, educational attainment, and material and spiritual conditions. To increase the generalizability of findings, future studies are recommended to use random sampling methods, personality tests, and diagnostic counseling in psychology clinics to screen and isolate people with personality disorders.

## 5. Conclusion

The study findings showed that transactional analysis training positively and significantly affected the communication skills of women such as active listening, straight-talking, understanding and empathy, and intuition. Therefore, transactional analysis training is recommended to be used to improve communication skills.

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## Ethical Approval

The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Islamic Azad University- Roudehen Branch with the code of IR.IAU.RUD.REC.1399.717.

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