# Examining the Effectiveness of an Educational-Therapeutic Package Based on the Perception of Women's Lived Experiences During Divorce on Suffering in Bajestan

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** The present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of an educational-therapeutic package based on the perception of women's lived experiences during divorce on suffering in Bajestan.

**Methods and Materials:** This research employed a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test and post-test and a control group. The statistical population included all women undergoing divorce in Bajestan in 2022. Through purposive sampling, 30 women were selected and randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. The data collection instrument was the scale developed by Schaalz et al. (2010). Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and inferential statistics (covariance analysis).

**Findings:** The findings indicated that the educational-therapeutic package based on women's lived experiences during divorce effectively reduced their suffering. Additionally, this intervention assisted them in approaching the topic of divorce rationally, free from excessive emotions, and increased their willingness to seek counseling.

**Conclusion:** Based on the study's findings, it can be concluded that the proposed educational-therapeutic package can be used as an appropriate intervention tool to reduce suffering among women undergoing divorce.

*Keywords: Women's lived experiences during divorce, perception of suffering, educational package*

## 1. Introduction

The foundation of the family is fundamentally built on marriage, which encompasses both emotional and legal commitment. Marriage is a crucial aspect of adult life, and choosing a spouse is undoubtedly one of the most significant decisions individuals make (Rix et al., 2022). The family is perceived as a dynamic paradigm, meaning that changes in family structure can lead to alterations in family roles, such as parental roles. One of the major issues that contribute to such changes and significantly impacts the family system is divorce (Lichtenstein et al., 2022).

In the process of divorce, both spouses, regardless of whether they initiated the divorce or not, lose their partner, a stable family structure, and their normal way of life, requiring them to exert effort in establishing a new life and relationships (Navabinejad et al., 2024). Changes in family composition, family roles, relationships, and economic conditions have profound consequences and can significantly affect family functioning. Consequently, the structural transformations that occur after divorce can influence the entire family (Godarzi & Khojaste, 2020). Divorce is considered a transitional process and is defined as an event that alters relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Abedi et al., 2024; Ardakhani & Seadatee Shamir, 2022). The rising divorce rate is a global phenomenon, showing a marked increase in both Western and non-Western societies. Divorce is one of the most stressful and emotionally intense experiences in a person's life. Since it disrupts the fundamental unit of society—the family—sociologists classify it as a social issue (Mosadegh et al., 2023; Parsakia & Darbani, 2022).

Unlike Western countries, where divorce often occurs amicably and through mutual agreement, in Iran, it is frequently accompanied by familial tension and stress. Several factors contribute to this phenomenon, one of which is social stigma, which disproportionately affects women compared to men (Rezaei Nasab, 2020). On the other hand, some women may perceive divorce as a form of rebirth, viewing it as an escape from the tensions of a highly conflicted and unpleasant marriage. Such women may experience a sense of relief and a more positive outlook on life after divorce (Gharaibeh et al., 2023; Ngambi et al., 2023).

However, women generally invest more in family life and bear greater marital responsibilities; therefore, compared to men, they tend to perceive divorce as a more significant failure (Jaberi et al., 2022). Additionally, women suffer greater economic and psychological consequences than men. Economic hardships faced by divorced women include a disproportionate decrease in household income, a significantly increased risk of poverty, the loss of home ownership, and lower chances of remarriage. Moreover, their responsibilities as single parents may further hinder their economic advancement (Leopold, 2018).

From a psychological perspective, divorced women, on average, experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, anger, feelings of inadequacy, rejection, and loneliness. They tend to exhibit greater emotional distress compared to married or single women (Jeffery & Qureshi, 2022).

Based on the researcher's observations, another issue that is more prevalent in small towns compared to larger cities is child marriage. In smaller communities, girls marry at very young ages, which not only subjects them to numerous hardships but also increases the likelihood of divorce and post-divorce difficulties. These young girls often experience divorce at an early age, and due to societal and familial pressures, they may remarry quickly, only to go through multiple divorces. As a result, recurrent divorces are more common in small towns. Therefore, it can be inferred that cultural context plays a significant role in shaping the consequences of divorce. The present study focuses on the city of Bajestan, a small town where post-divorce complications are likely prevalent. Ultimately, it can be concluded that separation has profound and severe effects on families, particularly women, triggering a range of fears and negative emotions such as sadness, guilt, and other distressing feelings. Considering the aforementioned issues, this study seeks to answer the following research question: What is the effectiveness of an educational-therapeutic package based on the perception of women's lived experiences during divorce on suffering in Bajestan?

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a quasi-experimental design with experimental and control groups. The statistical population of this study included all women undergoing divorce who visited the Family Counseling Center of the Behzisti Organization in Bajestan—under the Divorce Reduction Plan—during the second half of 2021. The research sample consisted of 30 women who were selected through purposive sampling and randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups.

The inclusion criteria for participation in this study were as follows: being between 18 and 50 years old, having at least one year of marital life, not receiving psychotherapy or psychiatric treatment concurrently with the study, and providing informed consent to participate in the interviews. The exclusion criteria included withdrawing from the interview or refusing to cooperate in completing the interview, as well as having personality disorders or psychotic disorders.

## 2.2. Data Collection Tool

**Perception of Suffering Scale:** This scale was developed by Schaalz et al. (2010) and assesses the experience and perception of suffering in three dimensions: physical, psychological, and existential suffering. The physical dimension consists of nine items rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from "never" (scored 0) to "always" (scored 3). The psychological dimension includes 15 items rated on a four-point scale from "very little" to "very much." The reliability of this scale and its dimensions was confirmed by Schaalz et al. (2010) in three different ethnic groups: African Americans (physical dimension: 0.63, psychological dimension: 0.90, existential dimension: 0.86), White Americans (physical dimension: 0.43, psychological

dimension: 0.87, existential dimension: 0.84), and Hispanics (physical dimension: 0.60, psychological dimension: 0.85, existential dimension: 0.83) (Schulz et al., 2010). Additionally, in a domestic study by Yarmohammadi Vasel et al. (2020), the overall reliability coefficient of this scale was reported as 0.74 (Yarmohammadi Vasel et al., 2020). In the present study, the reliability of the instrument was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a value of 0.86.

## 2.3. Intervention

The intervention was designed based on the educational-therapeutic package. Analysis of the package components indicates that it consists of three primary dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. The cognitive dimension includes three subcomponents: personal lived experience, familial lived experience, and social lived experience. The emotional dimension encompasses five subcomponents: avoidance of confrontation, sincerity, empathy, active listening, and unconditional acceptance. Finally, the behavioral dimension comprises two subcomponents: seeking counseling services and approaching the topic of divorce logically, devoid of emotional reactions.

**Figure 1**

*Educational Package Model*
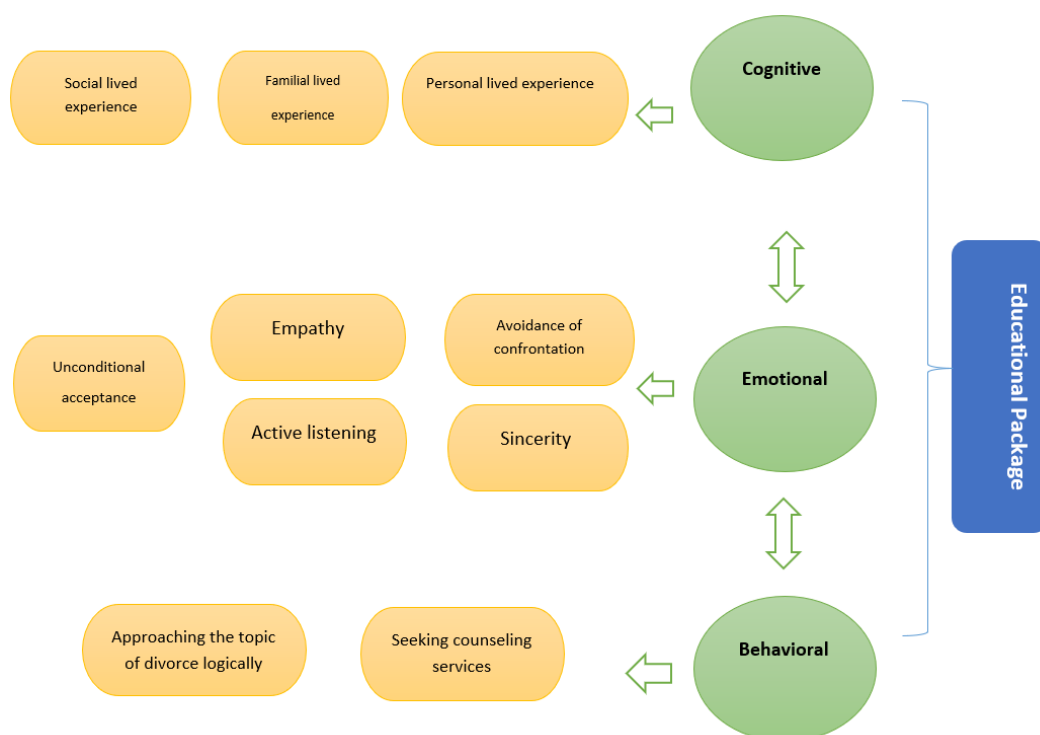
## 2.4. Data Analysis

For data analysis, descriptive statistical methods, including frequency distribution tables, central tendency indices, and measures of dispersion, were used. Additionally, inferential statistical methods, including multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA), were employed to compare the experimental and control groups in the pre-test and post-test phases. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software.

## 3. Findings and Results

This section presents the mean and standard deviation of the components of the perception of suffering variable.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics for the Perception of Suffering Variable*

| Variable | Test | Group | N | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|----------|------|-------|---|------|--------------------|
| Physical Suffering Perception | Pre-test | Experimental | 20 | 33.14 | 1.411 |
| | | Control | 20 | 32.85 | 1.350 |
| | Post-test | Experimental | 20 | 29.15 | 1.362 |
| | | Control | 20 | 32.01 | 1.715 |
| Psychological Suffering Perception | Pre-test | Experimental | 20 | 28.22 | 1.361 |
| | | Control | 20 | 27.11 | 1.425 |
| | Post-test | Experimental | 20 | 23.36 | 1.311 |
| | | Control | 20 | 26.95 | 1.514 |
| Existential Suffering Perception | Pre-test | Experimental | 20 | 16.50 | 1.531 |
| | | Control | 20 | 16.35 | 1.325 |
| | Post-test | Experimental | 20 | 13.50 | 1.702 |
| | | Control | 20 | 16.30 | 1.861 |

Given the mean and standard deviation scores of the perception of suffering variable components in the pre-test and post-test for both groups, it is evident that the score differences are statistically significant. There is a notable difference between the experimental and control groups in the post-test phase.

The designed educational-therapeutic training, based on the perception of women's lived experiences during divorce, has a positive effect on reducing their suffering.

This section tests the research hypothesis using statistical methods. The study includes one dependent variable (perception of suffering) and one independent variable (implementation of the educational-therapeutic package to reduce suffering perception). The experimental group received the intervention, while the control group did not receive any training. The study aimed to examine the hypothesis that the educational-therapeutic package significantly reduces the perception of suffering among women undergoing divorce.

To test this hypothesis, given that the covariates include pre-test and post-test scores for physical, psychological, and existential suffering perception, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted after verifying the necessary assumptions. The goal was to determine whether the linear combination of dependent variables, after adjusting for initial differences, was influenced by the independent variable. The results are presented in the following tables.

To test this assumption, Box's M test was used. The significance level for Box's M test was p = 0.104, which is not significant at p < 0.05. This indicates that the variance-covariance matrices are homogeneous, and the assumption is met.

Levene's test was used to examine the equality of variances across groups. Homogeneity of variances implies that there should be no significant difference in variance between the two groups. The significance level for all variables was greater than p > 0.05, suggesting that the variance of the experimental and control groups in all dimensions of suffering perception (physical, psychological, and existential) was statistically similar. In other words, the assumption of variance homogeneity is met, allowing for the use of analysis of covariance (ANCOVA).

Since the assumptions for variance-covariance matrix homogeneity and error variance homogeneity were satisfied, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was performed to compare the post-test mean scores of physical,

psychological, and existential suffering perception. The results are reported in the following table.

**Table 2**

*Results of Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA)*

| Test Statistic | Value | F | Effect df | Error df | Significance Level | Effect Size |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pillai's Trace | 0.623 | 9.565 | 5 | 29 | 0.001 | 0.999 |
| Wilks' Lambda | 0.377 | 9.565 | 5 | 29 | 0.001 | 0.999 |
| Hotelling's Trace | 1.623 | 9.565 | 5 | 29 | 0.001 | 0.999 |
| Roy's Largest Root | 1.623 | 9.565 | 5 | 29 | 0.001 | 0.999 |

As shown above, the results of the multivariate analysis of covariance indicate that all four test statistics—Pillai's Trace (F = 9.565, p ≤ 0.001), Wilks' Lambda (F = 9.565, p ≤ 0.001), Hotelling's Trace (F = 9.565, p ≤ 0.001), and Roy's Largest Root (F = 9.565, p ≤ 0.001)—are statistically significant.

This finding confirms that the linear combination of dependent variable components, after adjusting for initial differences, was influenced by the independent variable. In other words, the results of the analysis of covariance indicate that the educational-therapeutic package significantly reduced the perception of suffering among women undergoing divorce.

To further explore which specific components of the dependent variable contributed to the observed difference, a univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted within the multivariate ANCOVA framework. The results of this analysis will determine which aspects of suffering perception were significantly affected by the intervention.

**Table 3**

*Results of Covariance Analysis for Experimental and Control Groups on the Components of Suffering Perception*

| Dependent Variable Component | | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Significance Level | Effect Size |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Physical Suffering Perception | Groups | 9.066 | 1 | 9.066 | 7.769 | 0.009 | |
| | Error Variance | 38.511 | 33 | 1.146 | | | |
| Psychological Suffering Perception | Groups | 6.265 | 1 | 6.278 | 12.435 | 0.001 | |
| | Error Variance | 16.711 | 33 | 0.504 | | | |
| Existential Suffering Perception | Groups | 5.532 | 1 | 5.469 | 13.114 | 0.001 | |
| | Error Variance | 13.659 | 33 | 0.424 | | | |

The results in Table 3 indicate that, after adjusting for initial differences, there is a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups in the physical suffering perception component of the suffering perception variable (F(1) = 7.769, p ≤ 0.01). This suggests that a significant difference exists between the two groups in this component.

Similarly, a statistically significant difference was found between the experimental and control groups in the psychological suffering perception component of the suffering perception variable (F(1) = 12.435, p ≤ 0.01), indicating a meaningful difference between the two groups in this aspect.

Additionally, the analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups in the existential suffering perception component of the suffering perception variable (F(1) = 13.114, p ≤ 0.01), demonstrating that this dimension was also significantly influenced by the intervention.

Regarding the effect size of the intervention, the educational-therapeutic package designed to reduce suffering among divorcing women in Bajestan had the greatest impact on psychological suffering perception, with an effect size of 0.930. The intervention also significantly affected physical suffering perception, with an effect size of 0.780. The lowest impact was observed in the existential suffering perception component, with an effect size of 0.670.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of an educational-therapeutic package based on the perception of women's lived experiences during divorce on suffering in

Bajestan. After adjusting for pre-test scores, a significant difference was observed between the experimental and control groups in the components of suffering perception among divorcing women in Bajestan. The results of this study indicated that, on average, the experimental group scored higher in the suffering perception test compared to the control group, with this difference being statistically significant at the 1% level. Therefore, it can be concluded that the implementation of the educational-therapeutic package effectively reduced the perception of suffering among divorcing women in Bajestan.

The findings of this study are consistent with prior studies (Cabılar & Yılmaz, 2022; Derfashi & Zarneqash, 2020; Gharaibeh et al., 2023; Jaberi et al., 2022; Ngambi et al., 2023; Rezaei Nasab, 2020; Ridho & Ritonga, 2023; Sadeghi et al., 2021; Shafiei et al., 2018). The suffering associated with the divorce process, which women undergoing divorce consistently experience, is a multidimensional and complex construct that encompasses numerous real aspects. To address the challenges associated with divorce among Iranian women, various therapeutic approaches have been employed, including metaphor therapy, forgiveness therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), compassion-focused therapy (CFT), emotion-focused therapy (EFT), and integrative therapy. A review of these studies reveals that most prior research has focused on conventional therapeutic approaches for addressing divorce-related distress. However, these interventions, while addressing psychological issues associated with divorce, have failed to consider the cultural dimensions of the issue and the lived experiences of divorcing women. In other words, previous therapeutic interventions targeting the difficulties of women undergoing divorce have not been specifically designed to examine the lived experiences of Iranian women regarding suffering during divorce, nor have they been developed with a focus on the key components of their experiences. Furthermore, most existing interventions for divorcing women in Iran have been implemented using non-indigenous models. Therefore, it was deemed necessary to design an educational-therapeutic package based on women's lived experiences of suffering, tailored to their cultural and social context, and to use it as an intervention to alleviate their suffering during divorce.

Women undergoing divorce are particularly vulnerable due to the social conditions and stereotypes associated with the divorce process, which often cause them to experience greater fear and insecurity compared to other women. The stigma of being in the process of divorce and its internalization by women themselves is one of the most significant factors contributing to their feelings of insecurity in daily life. The lifestyle of women undergoing divorce—marked by loneliness, lack of social support, and potential homelessness—leads to heightened perceptions of vulnerability, victimization, and fear. Living with chronic fear and stress and internalizing these emotions has resulted in psychological and perceptual responses that exacerbate mental health issues among divorcing women (Ridho & Ritonga, 2023).

Regarding the interpretation of the findings, divorce can be understood as a social innovation that serves as a social tool for coping with marital failure. Women undergoing divorce adopt various approaches to dealing with life's challenges, and their lived experiences of divorce are often fraught with profound pain and suffering. A common experience among divorcing women is the initial denial of reality, which is accompanied by significant distress. Additionally, financial challenges are particularly prominent for women undergoing divorce, especially those with limited educational and social skills. Moreover, social and psychological security, the ability to endure the emotional challenges of separation, and adjusting to post-divorce life are all significant contributors to their suffering. The issue of child custody is also one of the major lived experiences for women in this process. Furthermore, many women suffer from harassment, mistreatment, and threats from their former spouses, adding to their distress.

Another crucial issue is adaptation to post-divorce life. According to research findings, some women cope with divorce in a logical and adaptive manner, whereas others struggle to adjust, which in turn exacerbates their suffering. Adaptation to divorce is a multidimensional process that encompasses psychological, social, and financial components. It refers to a state in which an individual undergoing divorce develops a positive self-perception and a sense of personal agency. Adaptation to divorce involves navigating through a 19-stage process that includes denial, fear, adaptation, loneliness, friendship, guilt, rejection, grief, anger, and ultimately, letting go and experiencing freedom. This phenomenon is not a uniform concept but rather a complex, multidimensional construct that encompasses various real-life aspects.

Furthermore, existential and spiritual perceptions of suffering are essential in helping individuals understand how to cope with pain, illness, anxiety, disability, death, loss, and feelings of inadequacy, which they encounter throughout their lives.

An analysis of the research findings in relation to the study hypotheses and the underlying theoretical framework (cognitive theory) reveals that the results align with the cognitive theory underlying this study. One of the pioneers of cognitive therapy, Kelly (2021), proposed that personality processes are influenced by how individuals anticipate events. A logical consequence of this principle is that people use their interpretations of past events to predict current experiences. Therefore, human behavior is determined by how individuals perceive and interpret events. Since individuals differ in their interpretations, there is a wide range of cognitive constructs. Some individuals possess flexible and diverse cognitive schemas that foster growth and psychological well-being, whereas others have rigid and impermeable schemas that lead to psychological distress (Mahmoudpour et al., 2021).

The educational-therapeutic package developed in this study aligns with this theoretical perspective, as it transformed the mental constructs of divorcing women in Bajestan from perceiving post-divorce life as "pleasurable" to recognizing the "significant suffering in personal, familial, and social dimensions" that follows divorce. As a result, this intervention enhanced their motivation to seek counseling, facilitated rational engagement with the divorce process, and reduced the influence of emotions during the transition.

One of the most essential cognitive-behavioral techniques for modifying maladaptive behaviors is cognitive restructuring. Through cognitive restructuring, women undergoing divorce are assisted in identifying their dysfunctional interpretations of events, modifying automatic thoughts and assumptions, and altering maladaptive cognitive schemas (Ngambi et al., 2023; Sadeghi et al., 2021). This approach is grounded in the idea that individuals should recognize the thoughts that trigger negative emotions and behaviors, assess their validity, and replace distorted cognitions with more realistic ones. This method is regarded as a key counseling technique, and therapists using this approach adopt a teaching-oriented method in their counseling and psychotherapy services.

One of the limitations of this study is its focus on a specific cultural and geographical context, as the research was conducted exclusively in Bajestan, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions with different sociocultural dynamics. Additionally, the study only included women undergoing divorce who sought counseling services, excluding those who might have been experiencing similar challenges but did not seek professional help. Another limitation is the reliance on self-report measures, which may introduce response bias due to personal perceptions and social desirability. Moreover, the study did not assess long-term effects, making it unclear whether the benefits of the educational-therapeutic package are sustained over time. Future research should consider longitudinal designs to evaluate the lasting impact of the intervention.

For future research, it is recommended to conduct similar studies in different cultural and demographic settings to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Expanding the study to include men undergoing divorce could provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender differences in experiencing and coping with divorce-related suffering. Additionally, integrating qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and narrative analyses, could offer deeper insights into the lived experiences of divorcing individuals. Future interventions should also explore the effectiveness of the educational-therapeutic package in combination with other psychological approaches, such as mindfulness-based therapies or resilience training, to assess whether multimodal interventions yield greater benefits. Finally, evaluating the long-term effects of this intervention through follow-up assessments would be valuable in determining its sustained efficacy.

## Authors' Contributions

This article is derived from the first author's doctoral dissertation. All authors significantly contributed to this study.

## Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

## Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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## Ethical Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the interview and participated in the research with informed consent.

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