

## Effectiveness of a marital counseling program to improve the skill of Conflict management among mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to discover the effectiveness of a marital counseling program based on the model (Gottman's model) to improve conflict management skills in a sample of mothers with autism spectrum disorder. The study sample consisted of (24) women who have a child with autism spectrum disorder. These women obtained the lowest scores on the study scale of conflict management skills, after applying the scale to a sample of (70) women who have a child with autism spectrum disorder and who visit the (Noor Al Hussein) Foundation in Amman and the Al-Ataa Comprehensive Center and Al-Razi for Special Education. These centers provide special services for children with autism spectrum disorder, in addition to family services for their families. Participants who agreed to adhere to the counseling program were randomly distributed into two equal groups. An experimental group and a control group, each group included (12) participants who underwent a pre-measurement and a post-measurement. To achieve the study objectives, the Gottman program was developed, consisting of 12 sessions, each session lasting (90) minutes, at a rate of two sessions per week. The results showed statistically significant differences at the level ( $0.05 \geq \alpha$ ) on the conflict management scale and on all dimensions of the scale, and the differences were in favor of the experimental group.

**Keywords:** Conflict management skills, Group marital counseling program, Mothers with autism spectrum disorder.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. The Problem of the Study and Its Importance

Autism spectrum disorder is considered (ASD) is a developmental disability resulting from differences in brain function. People with ASD have problems with communication and social interaction, in addition to repetitive behaviors or interests. They have different ways of learning, moving, or paying attention, and they have difficulties with language and visual communication, and repetitive body movements that make life difficult for them (Lai et al. 2015).

Parents play an important role in providing care and support for their child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as the child's primary caregiver. However, raising a child with ASD can be a challenging and important experience, especially in countries where support services are limited (shattnawi et al. 2020).

Mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder also reported higher levels of stress, care burden, health-related problems, decreased psychological resilience, and problems in various areas of family life, including (marital relationships and problems in family upbringing) (Meadan et al. 2021).

He confirmed that (Fairthorne et al. 2015) in a Western Australian study found that mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder were not only distressed, but also at risk of serious medical conditions such as cancer, and were at increased risk of premature death.

As he pointed out (Gobrial (2018) in a study conducted on Egyptian mothers who have children with autism spectrum disorder, found that this disease has a negative impact on the mothers' social life and mental health, in addition to the stigma attached to mothers.

As he pointed out (Montes and Ganca 2014) point out that financial concerns, economic burden and the need for additional income to cover the high cost of lifelong private education for these children.

This is a stressful and exhausting factor for parents, especially those with low incomes.

The ideas that parents have about autism spectrum disorder are mostly negative, such as believing that having a child with it is something wrong with them, which increases their stress, which reduces their level of marital and family compatibility.(Ilias et al 2019) Marital satisfaction is one of the most important factors affecting the effective performance of the family and is one of the most important indicators of a happy life. Accordingly, having a child with autism spectrum disorder can greatly affect marital satisfaction and family harmony and thus marital conflicts (Higgins et al 2005).

Mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder have low psychological health and marital compatibility due to their care for such children, in addition to feelings of guilt and blame in a defensive strategy and low marital happiness, and thus their ability to solve the problems they face is low, which contributes to marital conflicts and low marital compatibility.(Jalali-Magha and others 2008).

Parents of these children also face great challenges and obstacles due to the restrictions imposed on the child's communication skills, accompanied by the child's intellectual deterioration. Therefore, parents are exposed to the risk of emotional exhaustion, both physically and psychologically, which reduces their psychological compatibility and resilience. Which helps parents in resolving conflicts and related problems? Without the relationship, parents reach the stage of psychological stress. (Designing room and kurniawati 2023)

Marital life includes marital conflicts and disputes, and this is something that cannot be ignored, as the existence of these conflicts is a natural part of any marital relationship. Therefore, the behaviors that spouses adopt to manage conflicts between them are important. When these conflicts are dealt with incorrectly, this leads to the failure to achieve desires, dissatisfaction, and multiple psychological problems such as depression and anxiety. (Dildar et al. 2013).

According to (Gohmananel silver.2015) Marital conflicts are permanent conflicts, which means that these conflicts will be present, and it is important for couples to learn how to maintain their relationship in a healthy way regardless of the presence of permanent problems.

A reasonable percentage of these conflicts are temporary, while the permanent ones are conflicts that do not have a clear solution.

Therefore, they need to have more constructive and positive conversations and try to understand each other and reach compromises to maintain the stability of their relationship.

Marital conflict management skills are used to help couples adapt to each other and achieve harmony and stability.Undiyaundeyes.2006).

Therefore, there is a need for marital counselling intervention for mothers with autism spectrum disorder in order to work on raising the level of marital compatibility and reducing psychological pressures, in addition to providing them with skills to manage conflict between them.

The skill of managing conflict between spouses includes strategies such as accepting the other party's point of view and being open to discussing the motive behind the conflict, identifying and responding to important matters, the ability to seek a compromise, avoiding violence, and making an effort to resolve the conflict between them and overcome challenges and obstacles in addition to continuing married life (Al-Qaraleh 2020).

## 1.2. Problem of Study

The study problem emerged from many studies such as the study of Salehean 2021 and the lllins2020 study, which confirmed that parents, especially mothers, who deal with a child suffering from autism spectrum disorder are more susceptible than other couples to high levels of stress, fatigue, psychological pressure, and marital incompatibility.

He also stressed Faran 2024 Chtiord the unique needs and demands of raising a child with autism can lead to tension, conflict, misunderstandings, and emotional exhaustion. Couples find themselves struggling with different approaches to meeting the needs of a child with autism spectrum disorder, and disagreements and conflicts arise over treatment choices, educational decisions, and even daily routines.

These differences can escalate into betrayal, heated arguments, and negative feelings. As each partner struggles with the other to understand the complex, often predictable nature of autism, the emotional toll of caring for a child on the autism spectrum can be isolating, and couples may feel disconnected from each other because of the intense focus on the child's needs.

In addition to the financial stress and pressures associated with seeking specialized services and treatments for the affected child, this increases the level of tension and disagreements over budget, treatment options, and long-term planning, which exacerbates marital conflicts.

In addition, parents, especially mothers, may experience a range of negative emotions including shock, sadness and fear. The daily reality of caring for a child with autism can be mentally and emotionally exhausting, and social isolation and lack of understanding of others can add to the psychological burden.

### 1.3. Hypothesis of Study

The study attempts to test the validity of the following hypothesis: -

- There are statistically significant differences at the level ( $0.05 \geq \alpha$ ) in the average scores of the experimental group members and the average scores of the control group members in the post-test on the conflict management skill scale.

## 2. Method and Procedures

### 2.1. Sample of Study

The study individuals consisted of (24) married women with a child with autism spectrum disorder from the governorates of Amman and Zarqa, who were visiting special education centers to obtain family and educational services provided to their children and themselves. They had the lowest scores on the conflict management scale prepared for this study.

The sample was divided into two groups: the experimental group in Zarqa Center, which included (12) mothers, and (12) in the control group in Amman Governorate Center.

To ensure the equivalence of the control and experimental groups on the conflict management skill scale in its various dimensions, arithmetic means and standard deviations were calculated and a selection was used. T test.

**Table 1.**

Test results (T) for the pre-measurement of the level of conflict management skills according to the group variable.

| Significance level | Value T | degrees of freedom | Standard deviation |         | number | The group   | Dimensions   |
|--------------------|---------|--------------------|--------------------|---------|--------|-------------|--|
|                    |         |                    | deviation          | Average |        |             |  |
| 0.91               | 0.104   | 22                 | 0.83               | 2.04    | 12     | Empirical   | mitigate the severity of the beginning of the conflict |
|                    |         |                    | 1.11               | 2.08    | 12     | The officer |  |
| 0.81               | 0.235   | 22                 | 0.76               | 2.31    | 12     | Empirical   | Accepting partner influence                            |
|                    |         |                    | 0.95               | 2.22    | 12     | The officer |  |
| 0.94               | 0.074   | 22                 | 0.70               | 2.04    | 12     | Empirical   | Finding ways to relieve stress during conflict         |
|                    |         |                    | 0.66               | 2.06    | 12     | The officer |  |
| .84                | 0.193   | 22                 | 0.94               | 2.10    | 12     | Empirical   | Tolerance of partner's mistakes                        |
|                    |         |                    | 0.60               | 2.016   | 12     | The officer |  |
| 0.96               | 0.048   | 22                 | 0.51               | 2.12    | 12     | Empirical   | Total  |
|                    |         |                    | 0.55               | 2.13    | 12     | The         |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |         |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|---------|--|
|  |  |  |  |  |  | officer |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|---------|--|

The previous table shows that there are no significant differences between the individuals of the control and experimental groups in the level of conflict management skills as a whole and between the sub-dimensions of the scale, as all the (t)s are not statistically significant, which indicates the equivalence of the two groups in the level of conflict management skills.

## 2.2. Tools of the Study

### 2.2.1. Conflict Management Skills Scale

The conflict management skills scale defined by Subh (2024) prepared by Singer 2001, where the scale consists of (16) paragraphs distributed over dimensions, which are (reducing the intensity of the beginning of the conflict, accepting the partner's influence, finding ways to reduce tension during the conflict, tolerating the partner's mistakes, then extracting the validity of the scale in two ways: apparent validity and internal construct validity. It was presented to 3 arbitrators from Hashemite University, Yarmouk University, and Mu'tah University, where the comments received from the arbitrators were followed up and the paragraphs were modified with an agreement rate of no less than 80%.

As for calculating the construct validity, the scale was applied to a survey sample consisting of (30) married women, and then the correlation coefficients were calculated between the dimensions of the scale and the total score on the one hand, and between the dimensions on the other hand.

The values of the correlation coefficients between the dimensions of conflict management skills and the total score ranged between (0.66-0.82) and ranged between (0.36-0.77) between the dimensions of the scale.

- The values of the correlation coefficients between the paragraphs of the scale dimensions and the total score were also calculated, and the values were as follows:
- Reducing the intensity of the beginning of the conflict (0.66-0.84) with its dimension and (0.55-0.75) with the total score.
- Acceptance of partner influence (0.54-0.84) with its dimension and (0.59-0.68) with the total score.
- Finding ways to relieve tension during conflict (0.65-0.86) with the dimension and ranged (0.57-0.72) with the total score.
- Tolerance of partner's mistakes correlated with the dimension (0.55-0.78) and (0.41-0.58) with the total score of the scale.

Consistency implications of the conflict management skill scale The consistency reliability of the input was verified using Cronbach's alpha equation.

The scale was applied to a survey sample of (30) married women. The stability value of the scale reached (0.87) and reached, respectively, for the dimensions of the scale:

- Check the intensity of the conflict 0.75
- Accepting partner influence 0.71
- Finding ways to relieve stress during conflict 0.76
- Tolerance of partner's mistakes 0.77

### 2.2.2. Scale Correction

The final form of the scale consists of 16 paragraphs distributed over four dimensions, where the participant responds

- Very successful = 5
- consent = 4
- Neutral = 3
- Not approved = 2
- Strongly disagree = 1

These scores are given to all the scale items, so the total scale scores range between 8-16, so that the higher the score, the higher the conflict management skill. Then the conflict management levels are classified into three levels.

|        |             |
|--------|-------------|
| Low    | (1-2.33)    |
| Middle | (2.34-3.67) |
| High   | (3.68-5)    |

### 2.2.3. Counseling Program

After referring to many studies such as Abu Al-Nasr's study (2009) fetal 2020

Al-Shanwan 2019

Qawarah and Sharia 2018 And Western studies such as

Brihle 2014

Coan and Gohman 2007

Goattman and Gohman 2017

Cotman and silver 2015

Gotman, driver and tabares 2015

A counseling program based on the Gottman model has been developed. Goattman consists of 12 sessions distributed over six weeks, at a rate of two sessions per week, and each session lasts 90 minutes.

The program was implemented in Zarqa Governorate at Al-Razi and Al-Ataa Comprehensive Center for Special Education.

To verify the apparent validity of the program, it was presented to 8 arbitrators who hold doctorates in psychological and educational counseling from universities such as Mu'tah University, Hashemite University, and Yarmouk University.

This is to verify its consistency with the Guttman model and measure the extent to which the program is appropriate for its specific objectives.

The comments were taken into consideration and the program included sessions that included many skills such as communication skills and conflict management skills, such as: -

- Identify the types of marital conflict, and identify the keys and steps to managing conflict.
- Learn how to mitigate the onset of conflict and attempt effective reform.
- Learn how to calm yourself down and calm your partner down.
- Learning to accept the influence of the husband and dealing with emotional injuries

## 3. Method of Study

The quasi-experimental approach was used, which includes an experimental and control group, with a pre-measurement and a post-measurement.

The counseling program was applied to the experimental group only.

### 3.1. Variables

Independent variable: marital counseling program based on the Gottman model.

Dependent variable: Conflict management skills.

## 4. Results and Discussion

To verify the validity of the study hypothesis, the arithmetic averages and standard deviations of the responses of the individuals of the experimental and control groups were calculated on the conflict management skills scale as a whole and its sub-dimensions (reducing the intensity of the conflict, accepting the partner's influence, finding ways to reduce tension during the conflict, tolerating the partner's mistakes).

**Table 2.**

Arithmetic means and standard deviations for the management skills scale Conflict according to the group variable in the pre- and post-measurement.

| Variables                                      | Pre-measurement    |      |               |      | Dimensional measurement |      |               |      |
|--|--------------------|------|---------------|------|-------------------------|------|---------------|------|
|  | Experimental group |      | Control group |      | Experimental group      |      | Control group |      |
|  | M                  | A    | M             | A    | M                       | A    | M             | A    |
| Mitigate the severity                          | 2.04               | 0.83 | 2.08          | 1.11 | 3.84                    | 0.55 | 1.93          | 1.14 |
| The beginning of the conflict                  |                    |      |               |      |                         |      |               |      |
| Accepting partner influence                    | 2.31               | 0.76 | 2.22          | 0.95 | 3.81                    | 0.75 | 2.30          | 0.92 |
| Finding ways to relieve stress during conflict | 2.04               | 0.70 | 2.06          | 0.66 | 3.81                    | 0.70 | 2.06          | 0.64 |
| Tolerance of partner's mistakes                | 2.10               | 0.94 | 2.61          | 0.60 | 3.97                    | 0.29 | 2.08          | 1.01 |
| Total  | 2.12               | 0.51 | 2.13          | 0.55 | 3.86                    | 0.30 | 2.09          | 0.3  |

Table 2 shows that there are apparent differences between the individuals of the control and experimental groups on the conflict management skills scale as a whole and its sub-dimensions (reducing the intensity of the beginning of the conflict, accepting the partner's influence, finding ways to reduce tension during the conflict, tolerance of the partner's mistakes) in the dimensional measurement. To determine the significance of these differences, the accompanying analysis of variance was used, as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.**

| Eta square | Significance level | value f | Mean squares | degrees of freedom | sum of squares | Source of variance | Variables                                      |
|------------|--------------------|---------|--------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------|--|
| 0.10       | 0.12               | 2.566   | 1.950        | 1                  | 1.950          | Pre-measurement    | Mitigating the onset of conflict               |
| 0.58       | 0.00               | 29.130  | 22.129       | 1                  | 22.129         | The group          |  |
|            |                    |         | 0.760        | 21                 | 15.953         | Error              |  |
|            |                    |         |              | 23                 | 39,753         | Corrected total    |  |
| 0.00       | 0.73               | 0.117   | 0.072        | 1                  | 0.072          | Pre-measurement    | Accepting partner influence                    |
| 0.51       | 0.00               | 21,895  | 13,442       | 1                  | 13,442         | The group          |  |
|            |                    |         | 0.614        | 21                 | 12.893         | Error              |  |
|            |                    |         |              | 23                 | 26,540         | Corrected total    |  |
| 0.05       | 0.28               | 1.205   | 0.551        | 1                  | 0.551          | Pre-measurement    | Finding ways to relieve stress during conflict |
| 0.65       | 0.00               | 39.944  | 18,270       | 1                  | 18,270         | The group          |  |
|            |                    |         | 0.475        | 21                 | 9.605          | Error              |  |
|            |                    |         |              | 23                 | 28,531         | Corrected total    |  |
| 0.00       | 0.97               | 0.001   | 0.001        | 1                  | 0.001          | Pre-measurement    | Tolerance of partner's mistakes                |
| 0.63       | 0.00               | 36.632  | 21,540       | 1                  | 21,540         | The group          |  |
|            |                    |         | 0.588        | 21                 | 12.348         | Error              |  |
|            |                    |         |              | 23                 | 33.914         | Corrected total    |  |
| 0.01       | 0.59               | 0.299   | 0.029        | 1                  | 0.029          | Pre-measurement    | Total  |

|      |      |         |        |    |        |                 |
|------|------|---------|--------|----|--------|-----------------|
| 0.90 | 0.00 | 191.306 | 18,696 | 1  | 18,696 | The group       |
|      |      |         | 0.098  | 21 | 2.052  | Error           |
|      |      |         |        | 23 | 20,764 | Corrected total |

Table 3 shows that there are statistically significant differences between the individuals of the control and experimental groups on the conflict management skills scale as a whole and its sub-dimensions (reducing the intensity of the beginning of the conflict, accepting the partner's influence, finding ways to reduce tension during the conflict, tolerance of the partner's mistakes) in the post-measurement, in favor of the individuals of the experimental group, as all values of (F) were statistically significant at a significance level of ( $0.05 \geq \alpha$ ).

As shown in Table 3, the effect size for the conflict management skills variable as a whole reached (0.90) and the effect size reached (0.58, 0.51, 0.65, 0.63) respectively for the variables (reducing the intensity of the beginning of the conflict, accepting the partner's influence, finding ways to reduce tension during the conflict, tolerance of the partner's mistakes). This indicates the effectiveness of the counseling program in improving the level of conflict management skills among the members of the experimental group that underwent the counseling program.

The researcher attributes this result to the fact that the group counseling sessions were a safe and supportive space for improving the participants' conflict management skills. The counseling program sessions aimed to guide them towards a deeper understanding of the origins of conflicts and their effects on the marital relationship, and to enhance their understanding of relationships and effective communication in the context of conflicts.

This result can be explained in light of the correct counseling program that the experimental group was exposed to, over the course of (12) sessions, and what it included in terms of goals, tools, techniques, methods, activities, and duties, as the counseling program was designed with precision and care and in a sequence consistent with the conflict management steps derived from the Gottman model with the aim of improving conflict management skills. This includes the program that included discussing the concept of marital conflicts with the participants, directing them towards developing skills to reach successful settlements, enhancing their ability to start conversations with the husband kindly, and how to choose the appropriate time to discuss conflict topics, in addition to increasing their ability to accept the husband's influence on their thoughts, behavior, and feelings, and enabling each participant to replace the wrong concepts about conflict and its function in the marital relationship with the correct concepts, and finally training the participants on the skill of self-calming and calming the husband.

Gottman's couples therapy approach has introduced several research-based concepts about the health of marital relationships, which indicate that there is solid evidence of lasting relationships even through painful experiences and major life upheavals. (Gottman & Gottman, 2015). John Gottman's theory of healthy relationships, which was based on and its concepts in this program, was based on in-depth studies of more than 700 couples in seven different studies. These studies revealed that how successful couples communicate and how to successfully negotiate conflicts resulted in positive outcomes and stronger bonds. These studies also revealed that couples know each other well enough to avoid problems that may lead to unsolvable problems (Zutphen, 2016). It is possible to work on improving relationships, reducing emotional divorce, and reducing conflicts and loneliness in the relationship by teaching couples conflict management skills, dialogue about persistent problems, accepting influence from the partner, and increasing functional interactions between couples (Rajaeia, Daneshpourb, Robertsons, 2019).

This result is consistent with what many studies have indicated that the group counseling program based on several different trends contributes to improving conflict management skills, such as (Al-Qaraleh 2020, Hafez 2019, Al-Khazaleh 2016,, Zarei, Sadeghifard & Adli.2013 ( Tavakolizadeh, Nejjation)



These studies indicated the effectiveness of the counseling programs used in improving the level of conflict management skills and agreed on the existence of statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups in favor of the experimental group.

## 5. Recommendations and Suggestions

Based on the results of the study, the current study presents the following set of recommendations:

1. Conducting more studies and experimental research to test the effectiveness of counseling programs based on the Gottman model, targeting other categories such as newlyweds, both spouses, due to the lack of studies in this field, and examining variables other than the conflict skills that were studied in this study.
2. Improving the level of psychological services in civil society institutions and psychological and social support centers that care for women's affairs by preparing guidance and preventive programs and dialogue and group activities to improve the level of positive communication patterns and conflict management skills among them.
3. Strengthening partnerships and cooperation between local institutions, international organizations, the public and private sectors, and civil society in providing the necessary funding to implement marriage counseling programs in order to ensure that they reach a larger number of groups.

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