

Couples Therapy for Adults Experiencing Relationship Distress: A Review

Context

In Canada, approximately 40% of married couples can be expected to divorce before their 30th wedding anniversary, which suggests a high prevalence of relationship distress. Relationship distress can *cause* psychological and physical health concerns, such as depression, anxiety and substance abuse, and it can also *result from* health concerns, such as terminal illness, chronic disease, mental health disorders, infidelity, and unresolved childhood trauma.

Technology

Couples therapy is a common intervention for partners experiencing relationship distress. It is based on the idea that guiding couples through their conflict as a collaborative team is more effective than working with only one member alone. During couples therapy, a counsellor helps partners identify the reasons for the distress and find ways to alleviate it so that the relationship can be improved.

Issue

Although couples therapy is widely practised, its effectiveness as an intervention to improve relationship distress is unclear. A review of the effectiveness of couples therapy, as well as of the related evidence-based guidelines regarding couples or marital therapy, will help inform treatment decisions for adults experiencing relationship distress.

Methods

A limited literature search was conducted of key resources, and titles and abstracts of the retrieved publications were reviewed. Full-text publications were evaluated for final article selection according to predetermined selection criteria (population, intervention, comparator, outcomes, and study designs).

Key Messages

- For couples experiencing relationship distress, couples therapy appears to have a positive impact on relationship satisfaction.
- It is unclear if couples therapy provides any other relationship-related or psychological health benefits.
- No evidence-based guidelines were found.

Results

The literature search identified 335 citations, with 11 additional articles identified from other sources. Of these, 40 were deemed potentially relevant, and 20 publications, describing 18 studies, met the criteria for inclusion in this review — 8 randomized controlled trials, 9 pre-post observational studies, and 1 cohort study.

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