



The Effectiveness of a Counseling Program based on Unified Protocol Therapy in reducing Symptoms of Depression among

Divorced Women in Riyadh

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Abstract

Divorce is a social and psychological problem, and a general phenomenon in all societies. This paper aimed mainly to identify the effectiveness of a counseling program based on Unified Protocol therapy in reducing symptoms of depression among divorced women in Riyadh (Saudi Arabia). To achieve the objectives of the study, a quasi-experimental approach was used in a two-group design. Participants in the study (28) divorced women were randomly distributed between two equivalent groups with (14) women per group: (experimental-control), and the patient health scale (PHQ-9) was used to measure symptoms of depression, and the Counseling program based on Unified Protocol therapy.

The results of the study indicated that there are statistically significant differences between the average ranks of the experimental and control scores in the post-application of the depression scale in favor of the control group, and the results also indicated that there are statistically significant differences between the average ranks of the scores of the experimental group members in the pre- and post-applications on the total score of the depression scale in favor of the pre-application, and finally the results showed that there were statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental group members in the post and follow-up applications on the total score of the depression scale.

In the light of the results referred to, associations and institutions concerned with providing social and psychological services to divorced women may be recommended to benefit from the program used in the study to train and rehabilitate divorced women. It is also recommended that divorced women should enroll in preventive and curative programs, and not hesitate to seek help from specialists if psychological and social problems arise.

Keywords: symptoms of depression, unified protocol therapy, divorced women.



Introduction

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Divorce is a social and psychological problem, and a general phenomenon in all societies. In 2020, the General Authority for Statistics recorded an increase in the general divorce rate for the Saudi population by 13% than the year 2019. As for the Riyadh region, the general divorce rate during 2020 was (4.22) while the general divorce rate in 2019 was (3.36). Al-Harbi (2013) states that the growth of the divorce phenomenon and its recent increase is linked to the social, economic and cultural transformations that Saudi society has witnessed during the last four decades.

The results of the Saudi National Mental Health Survey indicate the prevalence of psychological disorders among divorced persons during the years of divorce at a rate of (60%) (Altwaijri, et al. 2020). Moreover, Hijazi (2015) states that divorce affects the psychological health of divorced persons, and specifically divorced women suffer from Symptoms of depression (Zafar & Kausar, 2014; Barakat, 2017; Nasih, 2018; Badr, 2021).

Depression is an emotional disorder characterized by a decline in an individual's mood, the appearance of psychological changes, including a feeling of loneliness, introversion, and insomnia, and physical changes such as a change in body weight and lethargy (Khalil, 2021).

Depression affects individuals' ability to think clearly, focus, make decisions and complete tasks, and causes reduced motivation, altered physical and cognitive functioning, loneliness, and disruption to the performance of daily activities; therefore, women need psychological counseling after divorce (Abdulrahman, 2009; Segal et al., 2018). Researchers emphasize the importance of developing counseling programs that help divorced women develop their social and personal aspects to improve their mental health (Strobe, 1996; Al-Beheiry, 2015; Badwan, 2019).

This paper aimed mainly to identify the effectiveness of a counseling program based on Unified Protocol therapy in reducing symptoms of depression among divorced women in Riyadh (Saudi Arabia).



The American Psychiatric Association specified- in its Fifth Statistical and Diagnostic Manual the criteria for diagnosing depressive disorder, which are: having five or more symptoms for at least two weeks that represent a change from previous performance, and at least one of the symptoms, namely: (1) depressed mood; (2) loss of interest or pleasure: a depressed mood almost every day, a noticeable decrease in interest or enjoyment of activities almost every day; and (3) significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain (APA, 2013).

Moreover, symptoms like changing more than (5%) of body weight in one month, changing appetite either decreasing or increasing almost every day, insomnia or hypersomnia almost every day, change in movement either psychomotor irritation or motor delay almost every day, fatigue or loss of energy almost every day, feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt almost every day, impaired ability to think or concentrate, or hesitation, almost every day, recurring thoughts of death, recurring thoughts without a plan, or a real suicide attempt, cause clinically significant distress or weakness in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (APA, 2013).

There are many theories that have explained depression; behavioral theory of Lewinson (1974) states that depression results from a lack of potential positive reinforcement and this is due to the lack of sufficient reinforcement from the environment, poor social skills needed to get reinforcement, or an individual's inability to enjoy available reinforces (referred in Marie-Louise, 2020; Davey, 2021). In addition, Miller and Seligman (1975) argue that depression occurs as a result of acquired disability and means that the individual is not exposed to unpleasant events; but he is used to it and believes that he is unable to change events.

Cognitive theory is the most influential theory in explaining depression. Due to the existence of deviations in cognitive processes; depressed individuals develop a wide range of negative intellectual schemes that direct them towards a negative view of themselves, their future and the world around them (Beck et al., 1979). Smith and Alloy (2009) present the most prominent theories and models that explain depression through rumination, including: Nolen-Response Styles Theory (Hoeksma, 1991), Rumination on Sadness (Conway et al., 2000), and Stress Reactive Rumination (Alloy et al., 2000).



Since the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, cognitive-behavioral therapies have been developed considering the transdiagnostic perspective, an approach that suggests that there are common factors between diagnoses of different mental disorders, and that understanding these factors will lead to an evolution in methods of intervention in mental health (Schäuffele et al., 2021).

One of the transdiagnostic therapies is Unified Protocol therapy (Barlow & Farchione, 2018). It is a transdiagnostic cognitive-behavioral therapy designed to treat a wide range of anxiety and depression disorders. It was developed considering the common factors of emotional disorders based on biological, psychological and developmental research (Thompson et al., 2014). It aims to improve emotion regulation, increase cognitive flexibility, and reduce avoidance behavior through five basic dimensions; namely, mindful emotion awareness, and increased cognitive flexibility, countering emotional behaviors, understanding and confronting physical sensations, and emotion exposure (Barlow & Farchione, 2018). It is designed to be a flexible therapeutic intervention that can treat a wide range of emotional disorders (Cassiello-Robbins et al., 2020).

More than 70 pilot studies have shown that Unified Protocol helps reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression disorders, develop impulse regulation skills, and improve quality of life (Barlow & Farchione, 2018). Bullisa et al. (2014) aimed to know the effectiveness of the unified protocol therapy in reducing depression, the study sample consisted of (15) individuals, and the results indicated the effectiveness of treatment with the unified protocol in the long term in reducing symptoms of depression and improving - from medium to significant - in job performance at work, home, social life and family relations.

Previous Studies

Bameshgi et al. (2019) aimed to determine the effectiveness of the unified protocol for transdiagnostic treatment in reducing depression associated with marital problems. The study sample consisted of (35) women with depression associated with marital problems, and the results indicated that there are statistically significant differences between pre-post-treatment in symptoms of depression, which means the unified protocol therapy is effective in reducing the symptoms of depression associated with marital problems.



Ostina et al. (2021) also conducted a study on (11) women who were exposed to different types of violence, and the results of the study showed the effectiveness of the unified protocol therapy in improving quality of life, emotional regulation, and a decrease in neuroticism and depression, assuming the effectiveness of the unified protocol in improving the mental health of battered women.

Celleri et al. (2022) conducted a study with the aim of evaluating the effectiveness of the application of the unified protocol therapy in group therapy and online in reducing anxiety, depression and despair and improving emotional regulation and quality of life. The study sample consisted of (7) women with an average of 27 years from Argentina, and the results showed a decrease in the sample scores in the post measurement of anxiety, depression and hopelessness, and an improvement in quality of life and emotional organization, which means the effectiveness of the unified protocol therapy in Group and online treatment.

Research Problem

Through the previously presented studies and theoretical frameworks, the problem of the current study is to verify the effectiveness of the counseling program based on the unified protocol in reducing symptoms of depression among divorced women in the city of Riyadh.

Research Questions

The research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the differences between the performance averages of the experimental group and the control group in the post-measurement of the depression scale?
2. What are the differences between the performance averages of the experimental group members in the pre- and post-measurements on the depression scale?
3. What are the differences between the performance averages of the experimental group members in the post and follow-up measurements on the depression scale?

A quasi-experimental approach was used in a two-group design. Participants in the study (28) divorced women were randomly distributed between two equivalent groups with (14) women per group: (experimental-control), and the patient health scale (PHQ-9) was used to measure symptoms of depression, and the Counseling program based on Unified Protocol therapy.

Study population and sample

The population of the study consisted of all divorced women in the city of Riyadh, totaling (92,557), according to the General Authority for Statistics (2023). The sample was chosen intentionally from the study population. The study tools were applied on (152) divorced women benefiting from Ayyami Association and the Mawaddah Association for the Care of Divorced Women, who had been divorced for a period not exceeding five years.

A sample of (28) women were selected from them who met the following conditions: They obtained high scores on the depression symptoms scale, and filled out the consent form to participate in the current study, they were randomly distributed between two equal groups (experimental-control) with (14) women for each group

The equality of the experimental and control groups was verified before implementing the program using the chi-square test in the following variables: age (3.40), educational level (1.733), work status (0.243), number of children (1.202), and using the Mann-Whitney test for differences between two independent groups to verify the equality of the two groups in the ranks of the depression scale scores, where the Z value was (-1.891), and the results indicate the equality of the two groups.

Study tools

- *Patient Health Scale (PHQ-9) for Measuring Symptoms of Depression:*

The Patient Health Scale (PHQ-9) was prepared by (Kroenke et al., 2001) to measure the symptoms of depression, and was translated by AlHadi et al. (2017) and codified the scale on the Saudi environment.

The scale aimed to determine the degree of depression according to the symptoms contained in the Fourth Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. It consisted of (9) items



describing the individual's condition during the past two weeks. Answers were given on the scale items by choosing one of the following alternatives: it did not happen at all, it happened some days, it happened most days, it happens almost every day, it was given scores (3, 2, 1, 0) respectively, and the psychometric properties of the scale were verified by calculating the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient, which reached (0.857).

In the current study, the psychometric properties of the scale were verified using the validity of the arbitrators and by applying it to (120) divorced women and analyzing the factorial validity coefficient (confirmatory factor analysis) where the ratio between the value of the chi-square and the degrees of freedom $CMIN/DF$ was (1,213) and the value of the Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was (0.042). Moreover, the value of the Root Mean Residual (RMR) was (0.019), and the values of the conformity quality indicators ranged from (0.902-0.997). All of which confirmed the validity and suitability of the scale for the study.

The values of the internal consistency coefficients also showed that the correlation between the score of each item of the scale and the total score of the scale was statistically significant at the level (0.01), and the composite reliability value of the scale was high, reaching (0.951), and the reliability coefficient value using Cronbach's alpha method was (0.953), and the split-half reliability coefficient corrected using the Spearman-Brown equation for the scale was (0.950), indicating that the scale had a high degree of reliability and validity.

- *Unified protocol-based counseling program:*

To build the counseling program based on the unified protocol, the cognitive frameworks and the main treatment procedures according to the unified protocol were reviewed (Barlow & Farchione, 2018; Barlow et al., 2018). In addition, the studies that used unified protocol therapy were reviewed (Bullisa et al., 2014; Barlow et al. 2017; Bameshgi et al., 2019; Schaeuffele et al., 2021; Camacho et al., 2021; Osma et al., 2021; Celleri et al., 2022; Ito et al., 2023; Mehrdad far et al., 2023).

The program was modified according to what suited the study sample. To verify the validity of the content of the counseling program sessions, based on treatment with the unified protocol, it was presented to (11) arbitrators in the field of psychology and psychological counseling, and (80%) of the arbitrators' approval was adopted.

The program aimed to reduce the symptoms of depression by training divorced women to understand emotions and know their cognitive, behavioral and physiological dimensions, as



well as Mindful Emotional Awareness, cognitive flexibility, countering emotional behaviors, confronting physical sensations, and emotional exposure. The program contained (18) sessions, each session lasting (90) minutes distributed over (6) weeks, three sessions per week.

The plan of the program sessions was as follows; First session: Introduction and acquaintance; Second session: Definition of symptoms of depression; Third session: emotional experiences; Fourth, fifth and sixth sessions: Self-awareness of emotions; Seventh, Eighth and Ninth Sessions: Mindful Emotional Awareness; Tenth, Eleventh and Twelfth Sessions: Cognitive Flexibility; Thirteenth Session: countering Emotional Behaviors; Fourteenth Session: Confronting Physical Sensations; Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Sessions: Emotional Exposure; Eighteenth Session: Recognizing Accomplishments and Looking forward to the Future.

Results and Findings

1. Differences between experimental and control groups in post measurement on the depression scale:

Table 1 shows that there are statistically significant differences at the level of (0.01) between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups in the post application of the depression scale in favor of the control group, and the value of the effect size (r) based on the differences between the experimental and control groups after the application of the program was (0.85), which is a large effect size ($r \geq 0.50$) for the proposed program in reducing depression.

Table (1): Results of the Mann Whitney test for the differences between the averages of the experimental and control groups in the post measurement on the depression scale

Depression Scale	Group	Number	Average ranks	Total ranks	Z value	Significance level	Effect size r
Overall score of the scale	Experimental	14	7.54	105.50	-4.493	<0,001	0.85
	Control	14	21.46	300.50			
	Total	28					



2. Differences in the pre- and post-measurements of the experimental group on the depression scale:

Table (2) shows that there are statistically significant differences at the level of (0.01) between the mean scores of the experimental group members in the pre- and post-applications on the total score of the depression scale, favoring the pre-application as shown by the increase in negative ranks over the positive ranks, the value of the effect size (r) based on the differences between the pre- and post-measurements of the experimental group on the depression scale was (0.88), which is a large effect size ($r \geq 0.50$) for the proposed program in reducing depression.

Table (2): Results of Wilcoxon test for differences between the mean scores of the experimental group in the pre-and post-applications of the depression scale

Depression Scale	Level	No.	Average ranks	Total ranks	Z value	Significance level	Effect size r
Overall score of the scale	Negative ranks	14	7.50	105.00	-3.300	0.001	0.88
	Positive ranks	0	0.00	0.00			
	Neutral ranks	0					
	Total	14					

3. Differences in the pre-and post-measurements of the experimental group on the depression scale:

Table (3) shows that there are no statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental group members in the post and follow-up applications on the total score of the depression scale, as shown by the equal number of negative and positive ranks.

Table (3): Results of Wilcoxon test for differences between the mean scores of the experimental group in the pre-and post-Applications of the depression scale

Depression Scale	Level	Number	Average ranks	Total ranks	Z value	Significance level
Overall score of the scale	Negative ranks	5	5,40	27,00	-0,051	0,959
	Positive ranks	5	5,60	28,00		
	Neutral ranks	3				
	Total	13				



Discussion

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Our results indicated the effectiveness of the unified protocol-based counseling program in reducing symptoms of depression in divorced women, and this result was consistent with the results of the study of (Bullisa et al., 2014; Bameshgi et al., 2019; Osma et al., 2021; Celleri et al., 2022). The reason for the program's efficiency and effectiveness in reducing the symptoms of depression in divorced women was due to the diversity of techniques and methods to reduce symptoms.

The most prominent symptoms of depression in divorced women are thinking about past events, ruminating on the experience of divorce, and not focusing on the present moment (Shooshtari et al., 2016), and this is consistent with rumination theory (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). The unified protocol targets this through mindful emotional awareness so that training is to focus on the present moment and avoid thinking about the past or the future, as well as accepting negative emotions without making judgments about them using the meditation exercise and fixing on the present.

Divorced women suffer from negative beliefs about themselves, the surrounding world, and the future. (Al-Joufi, 2014) and feel inferior (Badr, 2021). In light of Beck's cognitive theory, depression occurs as a result of the existence of a negative cognitive triangle which means that individuals tend to see themselves as worthless and incompetent, and believe that the world around them poses obstacles that cannot be dealt with, as well as looking to the future pessimistically and that their situation will not improve (Beck et al., 1979).

Attribution theory (Abramson et al., 1978) suggests that depressed people tend to attribute adverse events in their lives to fixed, general, personal causes (Davey, 2021), and the unified protocol deals with thoughts associated with depression through cognitive flexibility training.

Divorced women express that they always feel tired, exhausted and heavy in their body and that they do not have the physical energy to do the simplest effort (Abd al-RahmanN, 2009; Beck, 1997). The unified protocol targets the symptom - body heaviness, low energy and stress - by confronting internal sensations using internal exposure training and through exercise the woman gains the ability to tolerate this sensation without making judgments and thus changes the belief that they are severe annoying symptoms, intolerable and life-disrupting to believe that they are tolerable symptoms and tolerate them, which leads women to believe that they can perform other (stimulant) tasks even with these symptoms.



It is noticeable that divorced women perform non-adaptive behaviors in response to feelings of frustration, despair and low mood such as isolation, using mobile phones and watching the TV for long hours, as well as sleeping, rumination on traumatic events, overbuying, and unhealthy eating. It is certain that non-adaptive behaviors increase feelings of despair, self-blame and frustration, which in turn increase the severity of depression symptoms and its persistence.

In light of behavioral theory of depression of Lewinson (1974), when a lack of reinforcement occurs – frustration – called antecedents followed by non-adaptive behaviors by the individual that lead to an increased decrease in access to reinforcement from the environment (consequences), antecedents, non-adaptive behaviors form a self-sustaining loop that causes and maintains depression (as referred in Meiser, 2020). Through the unified protocol, maladaptive emotional behaviors can be minimized through the ARC model.

One of the most prominent symptoms of depression in divorced women is isolation, social withdrawal, avoidance of social events and gatherings (Al-Khalai 2016, Shaker, et al., 2016) and low motivation (Segal et al., 2018). Seligman (1975) showed that one type of deficit is the lack of motivation which means the weakness of the individual's response to the potential ways to escape from the negative situation, and it is noted that the previous symptoms increase the severity of depression and its persistence. When women isolate they increase their negative thinking and rumination of events also associated with isolation is the sense of absolute weakness in her social skills, which increases her feelings of despair and frustration and poor self-esteem and self-blame, which in turn increases the severity of symptoms. As for the weakness of motivation women feel difficulty in performing simple daily tasks, which negatively affects her self-esteem. The unified protocol targets the above symptoms – isolation, social withdrawal, avoidance – through emotional exposure.

It appears to the researcher that the decrease in symptoms of depression in divorced women is beneficial to them because of the negative effects of depressive symptoms on women's lives at home, work and in social relations, as the World Health Organization (2023) stated that depression negatively affects various areas of life such as education, work performance and social relations. The researcher believes that depression deprives divorced women of benefiting from sources of support and the benefits of social interaction. In light of the behavioral theory of depression (Lewinson, 1974), isolation of the depressed person leads to difficulty in receiving positive reinforcement from his environment (as referred in Davey, 2021; Meiser, 2020).



Our result indicates that the scores of the experimental group members on the depression scale in the follow-up application (one month after the application of the proposed program) have continued the decline that occurred after the implementation of the proposed program, and did not return to their level before the application of the program. Thus, the results confirm the continued effectiveness of the program in reducing the level of depression among the experimental group members. This result is consistent with (Bullisa et al., 2014; Barlow et al. 2017; Schaufeli et al., 2021; Osma, et al., 2021).

The results regarding the continued effectiveness of the program can be attributed to the fact that the unified protocol is based on the principles of trans-diagnostic therapy, which deems that Emotional disorders share the underlying factors for the emergence of emotional disorders, such as neuroticism, negative affect, and sensitivity to anxiety, and that it uses therapeutic techniques and methods that target common factors instead of using techniques and methods that target specific symptoms (Schäuffele, et al., 2021).

Unified protocol therapy is equivalent to specific treatment in reducing symptoms of emotional disorders, which means that a single treatment can be used to reduce symptoms of anxiety disorders and depression rather than using multiple individual treatments (Barlow, et al. 2017).

One of the reasons contributed to the continued effectiveness of the program was the design of the last session with the aim of reviewing achievements and planning for the future, as well as providing the program as collective guidance, which helped women get support, empathy and exchange of experiences. Group counseling gives results similar to individual counseling, in addition to that; group counseling excels in reducing the stigma associated with treatment, increasing the exchange of experiences among group members, and obtaining support and motivation (Barlow et al., 2018).

One of the indicators that indicate the effectiveness of the program is that members of the experimental group did not withdraw, and this is consistent with the results of Barlow et al. (2017) that revealed that the members of the unified protocol therapy group (UP) showed less withdrawn than the members of the specific treatment group (SDPs). The researcher attributed this to the strong construction of the counseling program and its containment of information of high value and appropriate to the needs of divorced women and the design of the first session with the aim of raising the motivation for treatment, as well as providing it online, which greatly contributed to the ease of attendance of women for the sessions. These results were consistent



with the results of previous studies that indicated the effectiveness of online counseling based on the unified protocol (Schaeffle, et al., 2021; Celleri et al., 2022; Peláez et al., 2022).

Conclusion, Recommendations and Limitations

Conclusion

Divorce is a widespread social and psychological problem, and the divorce rate in Saudi Arabia has been on the rise in recent years. Theories such as Lewinson's behavioral theory and Miller and Seligman's perspective on acquired helplessness elucidate the psychological ramifications of divorce, specifically in regards to depression.

Implementing a counseling program utilizing Unified Protocol therapy has proven to be efficacious in alleviating symptoms of depression among divorced women residing in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The study employed a quasi-experimental approach, which revealed statistically significant disparities in the average ranks of the experimental and control groups after administering the depression scale. These differences favored the control group. Furthermore, there were statistically significant disparities in the average rankings of the scores of the participants in the experimental group before and after the applications, with a preference for the pre-application. Moreover, there were statistically significant disparities between the average scores of the participants in the experimental group during the post-application and follow-up stages, specifically in relation to the overall score of the depression scale.

Moreover, the study examined the efficacy of a counseling program utilizing Unified Protocol therapy in mitigating depressive symptoms among divorced women in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The findings demonstrated that the program had potential in mitigating symptoms of depression among the participants. Therefore, it is advisable for social and psychological care providers to contemplate the adoption of comparable counseling initiatives to assist and restore divorced individuals. Furthermore, it is recommended that divorced individuals seek assistance from experts and engage in preventative and remedial initiatives to tackle any psychological and social difficulties that may arise as a result of divorce.



Recommendations

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According to the findings of this study, it is recommended to:

1. Conduct further research on the effectiveness of the unified protocol-based counseling program in improving mental disorders in different groups of society.
2. Urge associations and institutions concerned with providing social and psychological services to divorced women to benefit from the said program in training and qualifying divorced women.
3. Prepare electronic platforms containing psychological and social programs as free services provided to this category to reduce the effects of divorce.
4. Inform divorced women of the importance of joining preventive and curative programs, and do not hesitate to seek help from specialists if psychological and social problems arise that may affect the marital relationship.

Limitations

The limitations of the study are to study the effectiveness of a counseling program based on the unified protocol in reducing symptoms of depression among divorced women who are regular attendees of Ayyami Society and Mawaddah Society in the city of Riyadh. The study was implemented during the year (2023), which means that the results are specific to the characteristics of that time period.

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