

## The Effectiveness of Sensory Processing Training on Couples' Adjustment

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of sensory processing training on marital adjustment in couples experiencing marital discord.

**Methodology:** The study utilized a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design with a control group. The statistical population included couples seeking help at family counseling centers in Kerman in 2023, from which 30 participants were purposively selected and randomly assigned to experimental (n = 15) and control (n = 15) groups. Data were collected using the Graham Spanier Marital Adjustment Questionnaire (1976), a 32-item instrument assessing the quality of marital relationships. The experimental group participated in a 10-session sensory processing training program designed to address sensory sensitivities and improve emotional regulation and communication, while the control group received no intervention. Data were analyzed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with SPSS version 27.

**Findings:** The results of ANCOVA revealed a significant effect of sensory processing training on marital adjustment ( $F = 240.349, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.811$ ). The intervention explained 81.1% of the variance in marital adjustment scores, demonstrating substantial improvement in the experimental group compared to the control group. Sensory processing training was found to be an effective intervention for enhancing marital adjustment by addressing sensory sensitivities and improving emotional regulation and interpersonal communication.

**Conclusion:** These findings suggest that sensory-based interventions can complement existing therapeutic approaches to address marital discord. Further research is recommended to explore the long-term effects and applicability of sensory processing training across diverse populations and cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** Sensory processing training, marital adjustment, couples.

## 1. Introduction

Marital adjustment is a multifaceted concept reflecting the harmony, satisfaction, and effective problem-solving skills between partners in a marriage. As the foundation of family dynamics, marital adjustment directly influences not only the quality of the couple's relationship but also the psychological well-being of all family members (Azarosh et al., 2023; Sroosh et al., 2023). Marital adjustment, often linked to factors such as communication styles, empathy, and shared values, plays a critical role in mitigating conflicts and fostering mutual understanding between spouses (Javidan, 2022; Mohammadi et al., 2021; Okesina, 2022; Ramshini et al., 2018). Marital adjustment has been shown to influence numerous aspects of life satisfaction and mental health, underscoring its importance as a target for therapeutic interventions. Research highlights how marital discord can lead to issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress, not only for couples but also for their children (Tadros & Vlach, 2023). Conversely, higher levels of marital adjustment correlate with greater resilience in the face of external stressors, improved communication, and enhanced intimacy (Besharat & Rafiezadeh, 2023; Safa Kermanshahi et al., 2022). Understanding and addressing the underlying factors contributing to marital adjustment are critical to developing effective interventions.

Several psychological, social, and biological factors contribute to marital adjustment. Research has shown that attachment styles and communication patterns are key predictors of marital compatibility (Lee & Park, 2020; Ünal & Akgün, 2022). Intimacy, commitment, and mutual understanding further strengthen marital satisfaction (Navabinejad et al., 2024; Parsakia et al., 2023). However, external factors, such as infertility, financial instability, and job-related stress, can adversely affect marital adjustment, making the need for intervention even more critical (Banaha, 2023; Monga et al., 2022).

Recent studies have begun exploring the influence of sensory processing on interpersonal dynamics. Sensory processing refers to the way individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to sensory stimuli. Variations in sensory processing styles, including sensory hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity, can impact emotional regulation, empathy, and communication, all of which are essential components of marital adjustment (Jakobson & Rigby, 2021). For example, individuals with heightened sensory sensitivity may experience increased irritability or difficulty

concentrating in overstimulating environments, which could strain marital interactions (Lee & Park, 2020).

In clinical contexts, sensory processing interventions have primarily focused on children with conditions such as autism spectrum disorder. These interventions aim to regulate sensory input and improve functional behaviors (Patil, 2023; Ramshini et al., 2018). However, the potential application of sensory processing training in marital therapy remains underexplored. Given the growing body of evidence linking sensory processing styles to emotional and interpersonal dynamics, this approach may hold promise for addressing marital adjustment challenges in adults.

Psychological interventions that integrate sensory processing training have demonstrated efficacy in improving self-regulation, emotional awareness, and interpersonal communication (Roriz, 2023; Walbam, 2019). Such interventions can be particularly beneficial for couples, as they provide tools to navigate sensory-based challenges, such as heightened sensitivity to touch or sound, which may inadvertently contribute to marital discord (Jakobson & Rigby, 2021). Moreover, sensory processing interventions align well with other therapeutic modalities, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and reality therapy, which have already been shown to improve marital satisfaction (Azarosh et al., 2023; Nikraves, 2022).

The effectiveness of intervention-based approaches for enhancing marital adjustment has been supported by various studies. For instance, group psychosexual training has been shown to improve marital satisfaction and self-efficacy in infertile women (Banaha, 2023). Similarly, communication skills training has demonstrated significant improvements in marital satisfaction and adjustment among women (Nikraves, 2022). Other studies have highlighted the role of family dynamics and early maladaptive schemas in shaping marital compatibility, further emphasizing the need for tailored interventions (Körük & Özabacı, 2023; Rastgoftar & Khodadadi, 2024).

Building on this existing body of research, the present study aims to explore the effectiveness of sensory processing training as a novel intervention for improving marital adjustment. While prior research has primarily focused on the role of communication, emotional regulation, and intimacy in marital satisfaction, this study seeks to extend the scope by incorporating sensory processing as a critical variable. By addressing sensory processing challenges, the study aims to provide couples with new tools to enhance emotional connection, improve empathy, and reduce conflict.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design with a control group to examine the effectiveness of sensory processing training on couples' adjustment. The statistical population included all couples experiencing marital conflicts who sought help at family counseling centers in Kerman in 2023. From this population, 30 individuals with the lowest adjustment scores, based on the Graham Spanier Marital Adjustment Questionnaire (1976), and the highest conflict scores, based on a conflict questionnaire, were purposively selected. These participants were then randomly assigned to either the experimental group (15 couples; 30 individuals) or the control group (15 couples; 30 individuals).

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Marital Adjustment

The data collection tool utilized in this study was the Graham Spanier Marital Adjustment Questionnaire (1976). This instrument, designed to assess the quality of marital relationships from the perspectives of one or both partners living together, contains 32 items rated on a Likert scale. Scores range from 0 to 150, with higher scores ( $\geq 100$ ) indicating marital adjustment and lower scores ( $< 100$ ) indicating marital discord and dysfunction. The questionnaire evaluates overall marital adjustment and has been consistently validated for its reliability and validity. Spanier (1978) reported a reliability coefficient of 96% using Cronbach's alpha. Similarly, Sharpley and Crossman (1982) confirmed a reliability coefficient of 96% and recommended its use due to its robust psychometric properties. Additional studies in Iran have corroborated its reliability and validity, with Malazadeh, Mansour Azhai, and Kia Manesh (2002) reporting a Cronbach's alpha reliability of 89% and concurrent validity of 90% with the Locke and Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale (Moayed et al., 2018; Rastgoftar & Khodadadi, 2024).

### 2.3. Intervention

#### 2.3.1. Sensory Processing Training

The intervention protocol consisted of 10 structured sessions of sensory processing training delivered to the

experimental group. In the first session, group members were introduced to each other, and the goals, rules, and expectations of the training were explained. The second session focused on defining sensory processing, related disorders, marital satisfaction, and adjustment, as well as discussing the impact of sensory processing disorders on marital satisfaction and adjustment. The third session introduced visual sensory exercises, such as wearing colorful clothes and observing vibrant images. The fourth session covered taste-related exercises, such as chewing gum, sucking on lollipops, and consuming ice pops. The fifth session involved olfactory exercises, including smelling flowers and engaging in blindfolded scent recognition games. The sixth session focused on tactile exercises, such as using a rocking chair and touching various textured fabrics. The seventh session introduced proprioceptive and auditory exercises, including butterfly movements, swinging, and practicing auditory activities with headphones. The eighth session provided examples and guidance on using appropriate treatments. In the ninth session, participants practiced daily sensory activities at home to address various sensory needs. The final session focused on training individuals who interact with those with sensory processing disorders and incorporating sensory exercises in natural settings.

### 2.4. Data Analysis

For data analysis, descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to describe the data. To test the research hypotheses and evaluate the significance of differences in posttest scores for marital satisfaction, adjustment, and sensory processing between the experimental and control groups, ANCOVA was performed using SPSS version 27. A significance level of 0.05 was considered for all statistical tests.

## 3. Findings and Results

The descriptive statistics for the variables of the study, including marital adjustment scores in the pretest and posttest stages for the experimental (sensory processing) and control groups, are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1***Descriptive Statistics for Marital Adjustment Scores*

Variable	Group	Pretest Mean	Pretest SD	Posttest Mean	Posttest SD
Marital Adjustment	Control (n = 30)	67.63	10.77	70.77	10.61
	Sensory Processing (n = 30)	67.07	13.33	89.03	11.18

As shown in Table 1, the mean marital adjustment score for the control group in the pretest was 67.63 with a standard deviation of 10.77, and in the posttest, the mean increased slightly to 70.77 with a standard deviation of 10.61. However, the experimental group, which participated in the sensory processing intervention, demonstrated a substantial increase in marital adjustment scores. Their pretest mean was 67.07 with a standard deviation of 13.33, which rose significantly to 89.03 in the posttest with a standard deviation of 11.18.

These findings suggest that sensory processing training had a considerable positive effect on improving marital adjustment in the experimental group, whereas the control group exhibited minimal changes. Further inferential statistical analyses will confirm the significance of these observed differences.

To examine the effectiveness of sensory processing training, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was employed

as the most suitable method to control for the influence of pretest scores in intervention-based designs. Before conducting the ANCOVA, its assumptions were assessed. First, the normality of the data in both the control and sensory processing groups was confirmed using the Shapiro-Wilk test, with p-values greater than 0.05 in both pretest ( $p = 0.192$ ) and posttest ( $p = 0.096$ ), indicating that the assumption of normality was met. Second, the homogeneity of variances was verified using Levene's test, which showed no significant difference in variances between the groups for both pretest ( $p = 0.822$ ) and posttest ( $p = 0.766$ ) scores, confirming the homogeneity assumption. Lastly, the homogeneity of regression slopes was evaluated through the interaction between the covariate (pretest scores) and the independent variable (grouping). The non-significant interaction ( $p = 0.055$ ) demonstrated that this assumption was also satisfied. These results validate the appropriateness of ANCOVA for analyzing the data.

**Table 2***Results of ANCOVA for Marital Adjustment Scores Based on Grouping (Control vs. Sensory Processing)*

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p-value	Eta Squared ( $\eta^2$ )	Observed Power
Grouping	5169.389	1	5169.389	240.349	<0.001	0.811	1.000
Error	1204.438	56	21.508	-	-	-	-
Total	11683.186	58	-	-	-	-	-

Following the confirmation of the assumptions, the results of the ANCOVA test were analyzed. Table 4-6 presents the results of the between-subjects effects. The findings indicate that the main effect of group (control vs. sensory processing) on marital adjustment was statistically significant ( $F = 240.349$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.811$ ). This suggests a significant difference between the adjusted mean scores of marital adjustment for the control and sensory processing groups. Moreover, the partial eta-squared value ( $\eta^2 = 0.811$ ) indicates that 81.1% of the variance in marital adjustment scores can be attributed to the sensory processing training provided to participants. The observed power of the test was 1.000, demonstrating a high level of statistical power (Table 2).

These results clearly demonstrate that sensory processing training significantly improves marital adjustment compared to the control group, supporting the effectiveness of the intervention.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the effectiveness of sensory processing training on marital adjustment in couples experiencing marital discord. The findings revealed a significant increase in marital adjustment scores among couples in the experimental group compared to the control group. Sensory processing training explained 81.1% of the variance in marital adjustment scores, indicating that the intervention substantially contributed to improving the

harmony and satisfaction in marital relationships. These results align with the growing recognition of sensory processing as an influential factor in emotional and interpersonal dynamics (Jakobson & Rigby, 2021; Walbam, 2019).

The observed improvement in marital adjustment can be attributed to the intervention's focus on addressing sensory processing differences, which often underlie communication challenges and emotional dysregulation in couples. Sensory processing difficulties have been associated with heightened emotional reactivity and interpersonal issues, as noted in previous studies (Lee & Park, 2020). By equipping couples with strategies to recognize and regulate their sensory responses, the intervention enabled them to better navigate their emotional and relational challenges. This finding is consistent with Walbam (2019), who highlighted the role of sensory processing in strengthening emotional connection and attachment (Walbam, 2019).

The significant impact of sensory processing training observed in this study is also supported by research on sensory interventions in other populations. For instance, Ramshini et al. (2018) demonstrated the effectiveness of sensory processing therapies in improving the behavior and emotional regulation of children with autism spectrum disorder. Although the target population differed, the mechanisms underlying the interventions—addressing sensory sensitivities and improving coping strategies—are similar. These findings underscore the broader applicability of sensory processing interventions across diverse populations, including couples.

Furthermore, the results of this study align with research emphasizing the importance of emotional regulation and communication in marital adjustment. Besharat and Rafiezadeh (2023) found that effective emotional regulation significantly predicts marital satisfaction (Besharat & Rafiezadeh, 2023). Sensory processing training likely enhances emotional regulation by reducing overstimulation and promoting a sense of calm, thereby fostering more constructive communication patterns. Similarly, Körük and Özabacı (2023) identified early maladaptive schemas as predictors of marital adjustment, suggesting that addressing deep-seated emotional and cognitive patterns is crucial (Körük & Özabacı, 2023). Sensory processing training complements these approaches by targeting physiological and emotional aspects of relationship dynamics.

The study also builds on the findings of Banaha (2023) and Nikraves (2022), who demonstrated the effectiveness of group interventions, such as psychosexual training and

communication skills training, in improving marital adjustment (Banaha, 2023; Nikraves, 2022). These interventions often emphasize mutual understanding and empathy, which are similarly fostered through sensory processing training. By focusing on the sensory dimensions of interpersonal interactions, the current study adds a unique layer to the existing body of literature, expanding the scope of interventions available for improving marital relationships.

Another noteworthy finding is the intervention's potential to mitigate conflict within relationships. Conflict resolution is a key component of marital adjustment, as noted by Ünal and Akgün (2022), who found that constructive conflict resolution styles predict higher marital satisfaction (Ünal & Akgün, 2022). Sensory processing training may contribute to conflict resolution by helping couples identify and manage sensory triggers that often escalate disputes. For example, heightened sensory sensitivity to noise or touch may exacerbate tensions during disagreements. By addressing these sensory challenges, the intervention helps couples approach conflicts more calmly and constructively.

The intervention's success also resonates with research on the psychological impact of sensory processing. Jakobson and Rigby (2021) noted that individuals with heightened sensory sensitivity often struggle with alexithymia and emotional expression, which can hinder relationship dynamics (Jakobson & Rigby, 2021). The structured sessions in this study likely helped participants develop greater awareness of their sensory needs and emotional responses, fostering more effective communication and empathy within the relationship. These improvements are critical for building trust and intimacy (Safa Kermanshahi et al., 2022).

The findings of this study also align with broader research on marital adjustment and its predictors. Azarosh et al. (2023) emphasized the role of empathy in improving marital relationships, a factor that is inherently linked to sensory processing (Azarosh et al., 2023). Enhanced sensory awareness can improve empathy by enabling partners to better understand each other's experiences and needs. Additionally, Sroosh et al. (2023) demonstrated that integrative-behavioral and emotion-focused therapies improve marital adjustment, highlighting the importance of addressing both cognitive and emotional factors (Sroosh et al., 2023). Sensory processing training complements these approaches by integrating physiological and emotional dimensions into the intervention framework.



Despite the promising results, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Future studies with larger and more diverse samples are needed to validate these results. Second, the study relied on self-reported measures of marital adjustment, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Incorporating objective measures or third-party evaluations could provide a more comprehensive assessment of the intervention's effectiveness. Lastly, the study focused solely on couples experiencing marital discord, which may not fully capture the potential benefits of sensory processing training for couples in other contexts, such as newlyweds or those facing specific life stressors like infertility or job-related challenges.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of sensory processing training on marital adjustment. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into the durability of the intervention's impact and whether additional follow-up sessions are necessary to maintain the benefits. Researchers could also investigate the effectiveness of sensory processing training in combination with other therapeutic modalities, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy or emotion-focused therapy, to determine whether integrated approaches yield greater improvements in marital satisfaction. Additionally, studies examining the intervention's impact on specific subgroups, such as couples with sensory processing disorders or those from different cultural backgrounds, could enhance our understanding of its applicability and effectiveness.

To apply these findings in practice, therapists and counselors working with couples should consider incorporating sensory processing assessments into their initial evaluations. Understanding each partner's sensory sensitivities can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of their relationship. Structured sensory processing training programs, similar to the one implemented in this study, can be integrated into marital therapy sessions to address sensory challenges and improve emotional regulation. Practitioners should also educate couples about the role of sensory processing in relationship dynamics, equipping them with practical tools to navigate sensory-based conflicts. Finally, creating resources such as workshops or self-help guides on sensory processing and its implications for marital adjustment could extend the benefits of this intervention to a wider audience.

## Authors' Contributions

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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