

Solution-Focused Therapy for improving spouse's communication pattern

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Abstract

Problems in the family, especially among married couples, are often caused by unhealthy communication patterns such as indirect communication. The aim of this research is to improve communication patterns between husband and wife to be more effective. The assessment was applied to the married couple using interviews, observation methods, and the Couple Communication Satisfaction Scale (CCSS). The results show that the husband and the wife had difficulties in expressing their aspirations and emotions. The husband is unable to communicate his loneliness after retirement. Moreover, he wants to spend time with his wife at home. On the other hand, the wife is busy with her work, she rarely pays attention to her husband at home. The intervention technique was 6 sessions of Solution-Focused Therapy (SFT) to improve the communication pattern between spouses. The results indicated that the therapy is an effective intervention to improve communication patterns. At the end of the intervention, the husband and wife can communicate directly and openly.

Keywords

Indirect communication, family, married couples, solution-focused therapy

Introduction

A family is a basic unit in the social structure of society in which individuals are related by blood relations, marriage, or adoption. The composition of the family can vary, but it usually involves parents and their children. Husband and wife is a term that refers to couples who have legally become a couple through marriage. Married couples are two different persons in almost all traits and sometimes it feels difficult to get together unless there is a willingness from the couple to understand each other and it takes time to avoid causing conflict. Unresolved conflicts can make a change in family structure such as divorce, marriage, or the birth of a child, and communication within the family can have a significant impact on family dynamics (Putri & Lestari, 2016).

Husbands and wives have their roles and responsibilities that may vary depending on the culture and values embraced by the couple. In general, marriage creates social, emotional, and economic bonds between husband and wife. Some of the common responsibilities of husbands and wives include: (1) Emotional Support: Husbands and wives are expected to provide emotional support to each other, both in happiness and adversity. (2) Cooperation in Decisions: Couples are expected to work together to make important decisions that affect their lives, such as finances, work, or children's education. (3) Fulfillment of Family Needs: Husbands and wives have the responsibility to meet the basic needs of the family, both physical and emotional needs. (4) Financial Responsibility: Couples are expected to work together in family financial management and contribute financial resources according to their respective capabilities. And (5) Child Care: If a couple has children, they are jointly responsible for caring for, educating, and raising their children.

The roles and responsibilities of husband and wife can be well established provided that there is an element of adjustment in the most important and fundamental relationship, namely communication (Gleen, 2003).

Communication in a family is an important aspect of the development of intimacy and the ability to adapt between family members (Dai & Wang, 2015). Effective communication can be practiced in 5 ways, they are positivity, which means being kind, polite, and cheerful during conversations; Openness is an openness that involves the establishment of discussions between the relationship of various thoughts and feelings; Assurances are the guarantee that involve expressions of love and commitment; social networks related to spending time with both family and friends; sharing tasks related to involvement in household chores as well as anything that is the responsibility of the spouse (Canary et al., 2002).

Family problems may occur when effective communication is not established in a family, especially between husband and wife (Dai & Wang, 2015). Communication skills can create a pattern of good relationships between family members, and vice versa. If communication is not established properly, it can cause misunderstandings and differences in perception for the interlocutor and cause unwanted responses (Putri & Lestari, 2016). Misunderstandings in communication can also

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cause conflicts because of using the wrong communication style (Nelson et al., 2014).

The adverse impact of problems in the family can result in a disharmonious situation for both husband and wife. Moreover, the children may imitate the attitudes and behaviors seen and taught in their family. Spouses as parents in the family have the responsibility to teach family values and favorable behaviors towards their children (Kardinah, 2018).

The problems experienced by the couple as subjects in this case are also due to misunderstandings caused by indirect communication. The conflict began when the husband was retired, therefore he spent more time at home. Meanwhile, the wife felt that she had to be the breadwinner who funds family expenses. It made her participate in many projects which consequents coming home late.

There are several intervention techniques that can be used to overcome unhealthy communication problems in the family, including, Solution-Focused Therapy (Cahyani, 2020; Fajriyah, 2023), Strategic Family Therapy (Agustin, 2016), and Behavioral Couple Therapy (Pratiwi, 2022). The intervention applied in this case was Solution-Focused Therapy. The reason was that Solution-Focused Therapy has been proven as a highly effective method in overcoming the problem of unhealthy communication in families, especially among spouses. The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of Solution-Focused Therapy in overcoming communication problems that occur between marital couples.

Method

Assessment

Psychological assessments applied to the couple were interviews, observation, and the Couple Communication Satisfaction Scale (CCSS). Interviews were used to elaborate data from both sides, husband and wife about their problem. The observation was applied to cross-check the compatibility with interview data. Moreover, it was used to elaborate more data about the problem from direct observation..

The Couple Communication Satisfaction Scale (CCSS) was an 11-item self-report used to identify a couple's satisfaction in communicating with each other. The scale was rated on 5 Likert's points (1 means the most dissatisfied and 5 means the most satisfied). One example of the items from this scale is "I focus during the conversation with my partner". This scale examines the role of communication as a factor in the likelihood of satisfaction in a relationship. CCSS reveals aspects of communication perception in couples, aspects of communication satisfaction in couples, aspects of natural concentration of communication in couples, and aspects of communication behavior (Jones et al., 2019).

Case Presentation

The family consists of 3 members: a husband, a wife, and a daughter. The husband (58) has just retired from working in a state-owned private company. The wife (49) works as a civil servant. The daughter (20) is a college student in another city. She returns home only during public holidays or 1 to 2 times a month if there is no schedule. This husband and wife are a couple who have been married for more or less 29 years.

The wife stated that since the husband retired from his job, he just stayed at home and became more grumpy. The wife is still working because she is several years younger than the husband, therefore she still needs to work for more than 10 years. The wife said that the husband's pension is insufficient to pay their bills. However, for daily needs such as the cost of living for herself and her husband and the additional needs of her children, the wife often participates in projects at her job. The wife usually goes to work at 8 AM until 3 PM. Since she also commits to doing extra job, she often comes home late about 2-3 times a month. When participating in the project, the wife had previously asked permission from the husband but the husband only said that he let his wife make her own decision.

Since the wife came home late, even though not every day, the husband was always angry by blaming the wife who came home late because she was engrossed in her office mate rather than with her husband. Since then, the husband has always mocked his wife by saying why his wife is not as usual coming home late. Starting with the husband who always mentions his wife's time after work, it makes the wife feel upset but the wife remains silent because she does not want to make the situation even worse. Moreover, she feels tired and wants to rest after work. When the wife comes home late, even only 15 minutes due to a traffic jam or a rainy day, the husband becomes more and more often blaming his wife and does not ask in advance the reason why the wife is late. The wife had tried to explain to her husband but was still not listened to. This makes the wife even more upset and tired of following her husband's wishes. The wife had thought about responding to her husband angrily but she tried to prevent a worse conflict. Then the wife also said that there was a situation when the husband was getting angry with her and said that she was not good at taking care of the household so the wife was so angry and told her husband that he did not understand her situation. After saying that, the wife immediately went to the room and ignored her husband like he didn't offer food.

The wife also said that she wanted her husband to understand that their financial situation that not as stable as before. Even when the husband is still working, the husband tends to often come home late at night because he has overtime to work on monthly projects. When the wife asked why her husband was late, the husband usually responded in a high tone saying that he was working and not messing around. The wife has also asked about what kind of activities her husband has at work to build a variety of communication between the two, but the husband tends to ignore it because he is tired of work. Since then, the wife did not try to reprimand her husband who was often late and asked her husband. The wife only kept her feelings for more than 10 years of marriage so that there would be no conflicts between them. The wife said that she wanted to be like other families who could open up to each other, care for each other, and spend quality time together. However, this rarely happens because the husband is busy and she is also working. Learn from the husband's responses for a long time, the wife is used to not conveying what she wants and tends to let indirect communication be established continuously. This can be seen in the results of the scale that has been given where the wife gets a score of 19 (categorized as low) and the husband gets a score of 20 (categorized as low).

On the other hand, the husband said that their relationship quality has declined since retirement. The husband feels that his wife is more concerned with her work than he is. The husband also said that his wife tends to come home late. Then, when she arrives home, she also does not offer food or make small talk about the activities that her husband did at home. According to the husband, the wife tends to be ignorant, she always wants to rest because she feels tired. Meanwhile, the husband wants his wife to be able to pay attention to him. The more the wife ignores him, the more the husband feels annoyed and angry. The husband admitted that he failed to regulate his negative emotions to say that his wife could not take care of the household. The husband said that the wife's response was not as he expected, she raised the intonation of her voice. From the wife's response, the husband perceived that he was disrespected because he is jobless.

The husband also said that since his retirement his wife has been increasingly busy in the office. His wife also rarely eats at home and gives news when she comes home late. This situation makes him think his wife may disrespect him because she is the breadwinner. Even though the husband had prepared his savings before retirement to support his daily household needs. The husband is clueless why his wife is so hard to make money. The husband mentioned that the wife has also been less open about what is needed in the household. He thinks that she already has good financial preparation for their needs. In addition, the husband said that he felt lonely because he does not have any activities at home. Especially since their daughter moved to another city. He wants quality time together with his wife. He wishes that his wife will understand what he wants through his insinuation statement.

Diagnosis and Prognosis

Diagnosis

Based on the assessment, it can be inferred that there are communication problems between the husband and wife. The communication pattern is mostly indirect and creates emotional distress in their relationship. Therefore, we conclude that the diagnosis is Z63.0 Relationship Distress With Spouse or Intimate Partner. This diagnosis is referred to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder Fifth Edition (DSM-5-TRTM) (APA, 2022).

Prognosis

The prognosis in the case is good. This is because there is motivation and awareness shown by the couple to seek help as an alternative to solving problems to maintain the relationship. They also show commitment to change their attitude so that the problem can be resolved, and there is a cooperative attitude in the husband and wife during the assessment process until the intervention is completed.

Intervention

Solution-focused therapy (SFT) is one of the family therapy techniques designed to improve family conditions by identifying problems with each family member's communication patterns (Carr, 2006). SFT has been proven as an effective technique in reducing problems among married couples and can increase marital commitment to couples. The

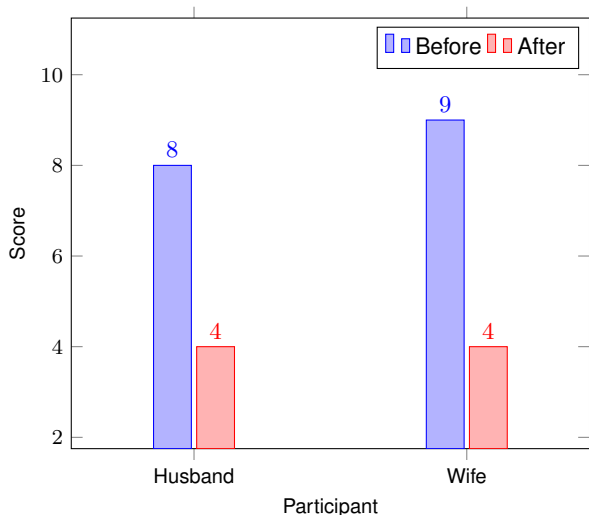
target of intervention in this case is to improve communication patterns that were initially not directly established, such as being silent, criticizing, and avoiding each other, into more positive direct communication such as conveying what they feel, listening, and understanding each other. Therefore, intervention using SFT is highly recommended in counseling centers to reduce marital conflict in couples (Pirmoradi et al., 2022). Other findings also prove that SFT can effectively help families improve communication patterns in the family by applying solutions to incorrect communication patterns (Safira, 2020). The stages in SFT are as follows:

Session I: Problem explanation and elaboration At this stage, an explanation of the problem that occurs in the family is initially given to each member who is the subject of the intervention (husband and wife). The goal was to provide understanding to each family member (husband and wife) about the conditions experienced. Based on the conditions experienced (husband and wife) are given an explanation of the dynamics of the formation of problems that occur in accordance with the results of the assessment. Explanation of the problem that there are communication problems that must be fixed. Then the problem exploration in each family member (husband and wife) is carried out using several techniques, they are normalizations, presuppositional questioning, exceptions to the problem, first session formula task, and scaling question.

Session II: Problem communication and task assigning. In this session, all members who were the subjects of the intervention (husband and wife) were brought together simultaneously to discuss the problem of indirect communication that occurred in the family. Then they were also conveyed that in general it is important for all members involved to be present together in this session. The goal is to communicate the problem from the perspective of each member and find solutions that can be done for better change. After each member is able to get a solution to fix the indirect communication problem that occurs in the family, then they will be given the task of implementing the solution or expectations of each member that has been mutually agreed. This task will be evaluated at the next meeting.

Session III: Change evaluation and further task assignment. In this session, all family members (husband and wife) were again presented at the same time. Then an evaluation was carried out to see the extent of the tasks previously given whether they had been carried out by each member. The task given in the previous session was to implement solutions in fixing indirect communication problems. Each member was also asked about the obstacles that each family member had in implementing the tasks that had been given. At the end of the session, they were again given the same task as the previous session, namely implementing the solutions that had been agreed upon to fix the problem of indirect communication in the family. This aims to train each member in making meaningful changes in order to improve direct communication patterns.

Session IV: Change evaluation and the surprise task. In this session, all family members (husband and wife) were again presented at the same time and again an evaluation of the tasks previously given. Each member was asked again



Gambar 1. The result of the scaling question

about the extent to which the solution could change the communication and bring change to the family. If in this session the husband and wife are able to show changes in improving direct communication, they will be directed to the surprise task, which is to ask each family member (husband and wife) to prepare pleasant surprises related to the things they like that will be given to each other.

Session V: Evaluation & Termination. In this session, all members who were the subjects of the intervention were presented simultaneously and an evaluation of the surprise task that had been implemented by each member was carried out. Then each member again gave a scale of 1 to 10 related to the condition of indirect communication problems in the family after being given the intervention. If the family has shown positive changes in improving direct communication with each other, then continue by evaluating the overall session that has been undertaken and asking about the benefits that each family member has received in participating in the intervention. This session ended by stopping the intervention session.

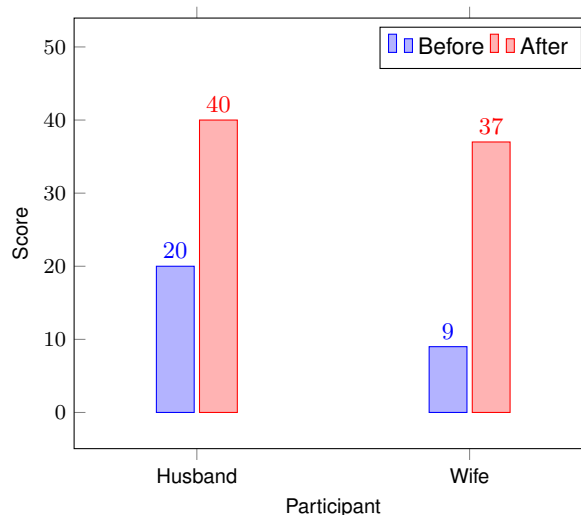
Session VI: Follow-up. Follow-up was carried out two weeks or 14 days after the intervention was completed. The follow-up aims to see the effectiveness of the solution-focused therapy interventions that have been applied.

Results and Discussion

Results

As a result of the interventions that have been carried out on married couples, there is an improvement in communication patterns between the two.

The results of the scaling question can be seen, where the scaling question is used for the wife and husband to assess how disturbed they are related to the problem they are experiencing, both before the intervention is carried out and after the intervention is completed. It can be seen that before the intervention, the wife and husband assessed that the problems they experienced were so disturbing to them, the wife rated 9 and the husband rated 8. However, after being given intervention, they can reassess that the problems



Gambar 2. Pre-test and post-test Couple Communication Satisfaction Scale (CCSS)

experienced after being corrected have decreased, namely at number 4 for both wives and husbands. Next, the CCSS results are presented which can be seen in picture 2 below.

The results of the pre-test and post-test on wife and husband can be seen using the Couple Communication Satisfaction Scale (CCSS). It can be seen that when the pre-test was given, the level of communication satisfaction in wives was 19 (low) and the level of communication satisfaction in husbands was 20 (low). After this intervention was carried out and re-measured, there was an increase in the level of communication satisfaction in wives to 37 (high) and the level of communication satisfaction in husbands to 40 (high). This is also reinforced by changes in communication between wives and husbands both before and after the intervention which.

Pre Intervention, The wife tends to avoid communication because she does not want to worsen the problem, lacks the ability to express her feelings and listen to her husband and the husband is less assertive about his wishes and tends to over criticism or blame his wife and also the husband found that it was hard to understand the family situation and unwilling to listen to his wife. than after intervention the wife is more assertive in communicating the problems, not ignoring or repressing her feelings, she tries to use direct communication, listens to her husband willingly, and commits to performing their old habits that make her husband happy. The husband admits and is aware of his aggressive behavior toward his wife. He also commits to modifying his behavior and communication, He begins to learn and listen to what his wife says without judging and try to understand the conditions of his wife who is still working, and perform old habits that make his wife happy.

Discussion

Communication is the key to the sustainability of a relationship, especially for husband and wife. Solution-focused therapy interventions conducted in various studies have been proven to help improve direct communication patterns between husband and wife. The problems that previously occurred between husband and wife were due

to an indirect communication style that often caused arguments. The interventions provided were able to change communication patterns to be direct, such as openness and listening to each other so that family relationships became better. Changes in communication patterns can be achieved based on solutions found to be applied as tasks for each member to solve problems (Cox et al., 2010).

Indirect communication may end in misunderstandings between family members which can cause bigger problems. Therefore, communication in the family is very important because it allows members to express their needs, desires, and concerns to each other. Through communication, family members can solve problems that occur in the family. Open and honest communication can create an atmosphere that allows family members to express their differences as well as love and affection for each other (Patterson et al., 2018).

Good communication within the family can re-establish harmony within the family. Effective communication within the family can also avoid situations that can damage relationships that cause marriage to become disharmonious. When the communication pattern is wrong, the system that is formed also becomes wrong. Likewise, when communication is correct, the system that is formed within the family becomes correct. Therefore, very small changes greatly affect the system within the family so changes are needed for a better system (Kim et al., 2019).

Solution-focused therapy (SFT) is one of the effective interventions to overcome communication problems in the family. The SFT approach can make someone make a change in the future. SFT is also one of the psychological interventions currently favored by family therapists because the focus of this therapy is on how to understand the cause of a problem, the pattern of problems that occur so that solutions can be found to solve problems in the family (Choi, 2020). The solution found in this husband and wife family is to be open to each other, respect each other and listen to what is said, and try to convey or ask in a way that is not offensive. Based on previous research that shows the effectiveness of SFT in improving family communication patterns by finding solutions to solve the presenting problems (Hartatik, 2018). Providing SFT is also effective in helping the relationship between husband and wife to be open to each other in communicating so that better communication is achieved than before in the family (Rahmah, 2020).

SFT given to husband and wife creates a new understanding to them that the problems that occur in the family are due to lack of communication and lack of openness to each other. Through SFT, husband and wife also understand that the lack of routine activities carried out together is one of the obstacles in improving direct communication. Therefore, husband and wife agree to make changes by creating routine activities such as having dinner together to provide an opportunity to communicate with each other. Little changes in the family can result in big changes and may restore a condition before the problem (O'Connell, 1998). Having a routine activity of having dinner together can train family members to communicate directly about what has been done, what is desired, and what is disliked. Simple conversations such as offering food, asking for help or something, and saying goodbye when going out can help establish direct communication in the family.

The changes that happened in the couple also show that applying SFT is an effective method of improving direct communication between them. So it can be said that the willingness of husbands and wives to make changes is an internal factor that is one of the keys to their success in intervening using SFT. However, all that is felt cannot be communicated directly because the husband and wife need more time to form a direct communication pattern into a habit in interactions within the family.

Conclusion

Intervention using solution-focused therapy (SFT) can improve direct communication patterns in married couples effectively. Before the intervention, the couple tends not to directly convey what they feel and want, creating a condition of mutual silence, avoiding each other, and criticizing each other. After the intervention, they gradually begin to directly convey what they want to each other without avoiding, being silent or criticizing. Therefore, SFT can help married couples to find solutions to the communication problems they experienced.

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Authors' contributions

FSR designed the study, collected and analyzed the data, and wrote the initial version of the manuscript. REP guided the study, wrote and edited the manuscript. CS guided the study. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Competing Interest

We have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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