
Post-divorce Adjustment: An Assessment of a Group Intervention

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Abstract

The present study examined the effects of a group intervention program designed to teach coping skills to recently separated and divorced adults. Twenty-four participants were randomly assigned to a program group ($n = 12$) and a wait list control group ($n = 12$) and were administered the Personal Orientation Inventory, the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, and the Beck Depression Inventory. The experimental group began an eight session program designed to help group members deal with post-divorce trauma. Each session included an opportunity for individuals to present specific difficulties or issues. Topics covered in the sessions included: stress management, stages of uncoupling, communication skills, relationships with ex-spouses, relatives and friends, legal issues, children and divorce, loneliness and depression, dating and sexuality.

Overall results indicated that the intervention program promoted reduced depression and anxiety, greater ability to live in the present, greater independence, more spontaneity, and an increase in the experimental subjects' ability to form meaningful relationships.

Résumé

Cette étude examine les effets des programmes d'interventions de groupe qui enseignent des techniques de support pour les adultes récemment séparés ou divorcés. Vingt-quatre participants ont été assignés, au hasard, à un programme de groupe ($n = 12$) et à un groupe contrôle ($n = 12$) ou ils ont complété le "Personal Orientation Inventory," le "State-Trait Anxiety Inventory," et le "Beck Depression Inventory." Par la suite, le groupe expérimental a entrepris un programme de huit sessions désigné à aider les membres de groupe à réagir au trauma post-divorce. A l'intérieur de chaque session, les membres du groupe ont l'opportunité d'exprimer (air-time) des difficultés ou problèmes personnels. Les sujets couverts dans ses sessions incluaient: contrôle du stress, stages de découplément, habiletés de communication, relations avec l'expartenaire, famille et amis, problèmes légaux, enfants et le divorce, solitude et dépression, nouveau partenaire et la sexualité.

Les résultats indiquent que le programme d'intervention promouvait la réduction de la dépression et de l'anxiété, une plus grande habileté à vivre dans le présent, une plus grande indépendance, une plus grande spontanéité, et une plus grande habileté des membres du groupe expérimental de s'engager dans des relations significatives.

From our earliest times people have subscribed to the institution of marriage. Along with marriage, however, comes the possibility of separation and divorce. Marital breakdown can be a personally devastating process, involving the need to confront an adversarial legal system, settlement, custody and emotional effects (Spanier & Castro, 1979). Physical separation is the critical phase of divorce adjustment, and often includes feelings of anxiety, fear, depression, hostility, rejection, helplessness and abandonment.

In Canada, the divorce rate doubled between 1968 and 1969, with the advent of Canada's revised Divorce Act, and between 1968 and 1978, it

increased five-fold (Ambert, 1980). Canada also falls within a group of countries having the highest divorce rate in the world, next to the U.S., U.S.S.R. and Great Britain (Gawthorne-Hardy, 1981). Whereas Canada's divorce rate in 1921 was 6.4/100,000 population, by 1978 it had ballooned to 243.4/100,000 population (Ambert, 1980), and with the latest amendments to the Divorce Act, these numbers will likely continue to rise. Current divorce statistics indicate that in 1984, 65,172 marriages ended in divorce (Statistics Canada Yearbook, 1986).

When considering the needs of this growing post-divorce population, the question arises as to what specific strategies are most effective in assisting this population to adjust to life after divorce. Although numerous articles exist which focus on the sociological impact of divorce and theories of divorce adjustment, too little attention has been given to empirical research which examines the efficacy of divorce counselling. Our search of the literature revealed only six U.S. outcome studies (Bloom, Hodges, Kren & McFaddin, 1985; Fetsch & Surdham, 1981; Fisher, 1978; Graff, Whitehead & LeCompte, 1986; Salts, 1983; and Thiessen, Avery & Joanning, 1980) designed to evaluate the effects of post-divorce counselling. We were unable to find a single Canadian outcome study on divorce counselling with adults.

The type of therapy deemed most effective to assist adults adjust to their post-divorce lives remains a widely debated issue. According to Gurman and Kniskern (1981) the existence of a broad spectrum of treatment approaches about divorce problems reflects the undeniable fact that there have been developed essentially no intervention strategies or treatment techniques that are specific to the emotional, behavioural and interpersonal difficulties caused by separation and divorce.

Most studies, however, support a group counselling approach. There are several reasons for this. A group can help individuals develop a sense of belonging during a time when loneliness and isolation often occur, and can provide a safe venue for venting feelings of anger, frustration, grief and sorrow. Welsh and Granvald (1977) suggest that a group approach to divorce adjustment can also provide an opportunity for vicarious learning, the benefit of peer understanding and support, a motivational force to move individuals towards a constructive change, and facilitates the development of a social support network.

In addition Fetsch and Surdam (1981) and Salts (1983) suggest that including a discussion of the stages of uncoupling can contribute to improving the divorced person's adjustment. Thiessen, Avery, and Joanning (1980) suggest that an intervention program which provides divorced persons with communication skills or enhances their already existing skills can increase the possibility that they will develop and maintain a positive and important social support system. Graff, Whitehead and LeCompte (1986) advocate the use of cognitive-behavioural strategies

and Bloom, Hodges, Kern and McFaddin (1985) suggest a cognitive approach to helping adults adjust to their post-divorce lives.

The purpose of this study was to examine the therapeutic outcome of a group intervention program which combined the teaching and improving of communication skills, stages of uncoupling, and several cognitive-behavioural strategies such as visualization, relaxation training and goal setting. It was expected that this program would produce changes in anxiety, depression, independence, spontaneity, capacity for intimacy and the ability of the experimental subjects to live in the present.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 24 adults who lived in an urban community on central Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada. The population of this community is approximately 70,000. There were 21 women and 3 men who were referred to the program by a mental health centre or medical agencies. Some participants responded to advertisements placed in a local newspaper. The mean age of the subjects was 36.8 years. They ranged in age from 21 to 57 years. The subjects were of middle income, and their intellectual ability was estimated as average to superior.

Instruments

The following three instruments were administered to all subjects as a pre- and post-test.

The Personal Orientation Inventory (POI). The POI is a 150-item forced-choice instrument devised by Shostrum (1966) to measure self-actualization and therapeutic effect. The variables this instrument measures seem to closely parallel those emphasized in post-divorce adjustment, particularly Inner Directed Support and Time Competency (Fisher, 1978). The Inner Directed Support Scale (127 items) measures one's tendency to act on and be guided by one's own principles and motives. The Time Competency Scale (23 items) measures one's tendency to exist primarily in the present, free from problems over past events and future concerns (Bloxom, 1977). Bloxom reports the reliability coefficients range from .55 to .85.

State-Trait Anxiety Scale (STAI). This scale, developed by Spielberger, Gorsuch, Vagg and Lushene (1968) is a 40-item self-report, Likert-type instrument comprising separate scales for measuring state and trait anxiety. Spielberger et al. define state anxiety as a temporary emotional state characterized by subjective feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry. They define trait anxiety as a relatively stable anxiety

proneness. Alpha reliability coefficients range from .83 to .92 for State scores and .86 to .92 for Trait scores.

Beck Depression Inventory (BDI). The Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock & Erbaugh, 1961) consists of 21 categories of symptoms and attitudes. Each category describes a specific behavioural manifestation of depression and consists of a graded series of four or five self-evaluative statements. These statements are ranked to reflect the range of severity of the symptom from neutral to maximum severity. Alpha coefficient estimations of reliability range from .79 to .91.

Procedure

The twenty-four subjects who volunteered to participate in this study were randomly assigned to an experimental group ($n = 12$) and to a control group ($n = 12$). Each participant was administered the Personal Orientation Inventory, the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, and the Beck Depression Inventory as a pre-test.

The participants assigned to the control group were told that the present group was full, but that a new group would be starting immediately upon the completion of the first group six weeks hence. The members of the control group were contacted by the group leaders once a week over the six week waiting period. Although this contact was limited to reminding them that the next group would begin soon and to ask how they were doing, they were invited to contact the leaders should they feel the need for crisis oriented counselling. None did so.

The sessions with the experimental subjects began with an icebreaking exercise, including the teaching of communication skills, the stages of uncoupling, visualization, relaxation and goal-setting exercises, "air-time" during which participants were given the opportunity to discuss personal problems and concerns, and concluded with expressions of appreciation to, and among, group members. The sessions were led by the first author and his assistant. A lawyer presented the session on legal issues.

The first session opened by members forming diads, introducing themselves to the other member and telling a little about themselves. In the large group, each member was asked to introduce the other member of the diad to the group. This was followed by a discussion on confidentiality and the development of rules for maintaining confidentiality. These rules were written down as they were developed and the participants were given copies during the second session. The group then formed triads and were asked to discuss what they hoped to get from the group, and what they felt they could bring to the group. In the large group each triad reported their "gives" and "gets." This exercise helped the leaders clarify the group members' expectations. It also helped the participants feel they had something to offer the group and seemed to

develop a realization among group members that they must accept a personal responsibility for change. This was followed by a discussion on stress, its effects, and a relaxation exercise focused on deep breathing.

The second session started with trust-building exercises and a relaxation and visualization exercise. This was followed by a discussion of the stages of divorce, including various stage theories of coupling and uncoupling. The purpose of the discussion was to help participants view divorce adjustment as a process, and to help provide them with a different perspective on their experience. "Temperature readings" were then introduced in which participants learned to use "I" messages to express appreciations, concerns and current needs. Participants were encouraged to express their appreciations or concerns as a closing exercise for this session.

The third session opened with "temperature readings" and a relaxation exercise. This was followed by a discussion on perceptions, judgements, and feelings about divorce. It was explained that often we make judgements based on what we perceive through our senses. Our feelings are triggered by our judgements and we behave according to these feelings. Our behaviour is often a way of broadcasting how we feel. In diads, the participants were asked to take turns verbalizing their perceptions, judgements and feelings using "I" messages as a way of developing communication skills. After debriefing this exercise, a lecturette was presented on continuing relationships with ex-spouses. It was suggested that this relationship has likely not ended, but rather altered, and will be ongoing in some way, especially where children and families are involved. This session closed with "temperature readings" during which the participants were encouraged to express appreciations and concerns that were generated from this session.

Session four began with "temperature readings" and a relaxation exercise. This was followed by a lecturette on maintaining ongoing relationships with family members, mutual friends, and in-laws. The purpose of this exercise was to reduce the anxiety inherent in maintaining these relationships. The emphasis was that these relationships can change, but that we all have some power to change them constructively. Ways to handle delicate relationships were discussed. It was also pointed out that some relationships are lost for reasons unrelated to each of us as individuals.

The fifth session was centred on issues regarding children of divorce, and legal issues. After a "temperature reading" and a relaxation exercise, a lecturette was presented giving information about the effects of divorce on children, and the importance of protecting them from the bitterness of divorce. The following points were made. Children need to know that their parents, whether or not they are living together, are still available, and love them. Also, it is common for children to blame them-

selves for the failure of the marriage, and to fear that both parents could leave them. Participants were encouraged to address these issues openly with their children. Personal concerns were addressed and role-playing was used to help the participants develop skills to talk with their children about divorce. For the second half of this session, a lawyer joined the group to discuss legal issues about divorce, and to answer specific questions concerning the participants.

Session six began with “temperature readings” and a relaxation exercise. This was followed by a lecturette and discussion on loneliness and depression. This discussion included symptoms, coping strategies, and where and when to seek outside help. Time was also given to discuss specific issues the participants might want to address in the remaining sessions.

Session seven centred on dating and sexuality issues. After the routine “temperature readings” and relaxation exercise a discussion centred on the problems inherent in exploring new relationships. Many participants expressed confused feelings about dating and sexuality. Some confessed to shying away from the idea of building new relationships, while others confessed to becoming overly involved in dependent relationships. Participants were encouraged not to involve themselves in new love relationships too hastily, but rather to explore building friendships slowly. The group concluded that most people will experience some transitional relationships as they continue through the process of adjusting to being single.

The eighth session opened with a rather extended “temperature reading” period. This was followed by a relaxation and visualization exercise on being single and successful. The group was asked to fill out anonymous written evaluations of their experiences in the group. The leaders then presented a list of referral resources which would provide ongoing assistance. This was followed by an exercise in which the participants wrote positive anonymous statements about others in the group. This exercise led to a positive closure for the members. Final “temperature readings” then allowed for final goodbyes and for expressions of appreciations to others in the group.

One week after the termination of the experimental group intervention, and immediately prior to the beginning of the intervention with the control group, the Personal Orientation Inventory, the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory and the Beck Depression Inventory were readministered to both groups.

TABLE 1

Analysis of Variance comparing treatment group
and control group responses on the POI with Pre-test scores
as the covariate on the Post-test scores

Source of Variation	Sum of		Mean		Sig of F
	Squares	DF	Square	F	
Covariates	6832.340	1	6832.340	56.745	.000
PRETOT	6832.340	1	6832.340	56.745	.000
Main Effects	4173.189	1	4173.189	34.660	.000
GROUP	4173.189	1	4173.189	34.660	.000
Explained	11005.529	2	5502.764	45,703	.000
Residual	2528.471	21	120.403		
Total	13534.000	23	588.435		

RESULTS

An analysis of variance was used to determine the difference between the groups. No significant differences were found between the two groups on any of the pre-test measures.

Post-test scores for the Personal Orientation Inventory sub-tests did indicate significant differences between the groups. See Table 1. These sub-tests included measures of Time Competency, $F(1,22) = 18.49$, $p < .001$, Independence, $F(1,22) = 17.86$, $p < .001$, Spontaneity, $F(1,22) = 7.80$, $p < .011$, and Capacity for Intimacy, $F(1,22) = 12.39$, $p < .002$.

Post-test scores on the State-Trait Anxiety Scale indicated a significant difference between groups for both state and trait anxiety. See Table 2. For the State scale, $F(1,22) = 10.90$, $p < .003$, and for the Trait scale, $F(1,22) = 18.47$, $p < .001$.

Post-test scores on the Beck Depression Inventory also showed significant differences between the two groups. See Table 3. For this test, $F(1,19) = 15.78$, $p < .001$.

TABLE 2

Analysis of variance comparing treatment group and control group responses on the STAI with Pre-test scores as the covariate on the Post-test scores

Source of Variation	Sum of		Mean		Sig of F
	Squares	DF	Square	F	
Covariates	8775.871	1	8775.871	42.665	.000
PRETOT	8775.871	1	8775.871	42.665	.000
Main Effects	5144.603	1	5144.603	25.011	.000
GROUP	5144.603	1	5144.603	25.011	.000
Explained	13920.474	2	6960.237	33.838	.000
Residual	4319.86	21	205.692		
Total	18240.000	23	793.043		

DISCUSSION

A primary assumption of this study was that, for a significant portion of the adult population, attachment and emotional investment are primarily realized in marriage. Hence the dissolution of a marriage represents a loss of attachment and therefore the beginning of a painful and relatively long term adjustment by the separating couple, lasting from several months to several years. This intervention approach, using a group seminar format, and including individual "air-time" for the participants, seemed to be an effective treatment for this population.

Data collected from the Personal Orientation Inventory suggests significant change in Time Competence (Tc) by the experimental group. This translates into the participants' increased ability to live in the present, and to be less preoccupied with the past or the future. A characteristic of self-actualizing people is their ability to live primarily in the present, tying the past and future together in a meaningful continuity. This suggests then, that the experimental group began to see their divorce as part of the ongoing fabric of their lives, a situation by which to learn rather than a discrete, pointless event.

TABLE 3

Analysis of Variance comparing treatment group and control group responses on the Beck Depression Inventory with Pre-test scores as the Covariate on the Post-test scores.

Source of Variation	Sum of		Mean		Sig
	Squares	DF	Square	F	of F
Covariates	1670.633	1	1670.633	69.608	.000
BPRE	1670.633	1	1670.633	69.608	.000
Main Effects	593.164	1	593.164	24.714	.000
GROUP	593.164	1	593.164	24.714	.000
Explained	2263.797	2	1131.898	47.161	.000
Residual	432.013	18	24.001		
Total	2695.810	20	134.790		

The significant change in the Independence (I) sub-test suggests improved ability to be self-supportive rather than dependent on others. This would indicate that the participants moved in the direction of becoming more "self" oriented than "other" oriented, and that they are now guided more by internalized principles and motivations. This improved score suggests an improvement in autonomy by showing a greater balance between other-directedness and inner-directedness.

Improved scores for spontaneity (S) indicate a greater ability to be oneself, and less restriction in the presentation of oneself to the world. An improvement in the Capacity for Intimacy (C) scale suggests an increased ability to form meaningful relationships with others, less encumbered with expectations and obligations.

Improvement by the experimental group on State-Trait Anxiety scale suggests their improved ability to cope with the anxiety inherent in their lives, and a tendency to view current stressors as less traumatic. That is,

there is an apparent positive change in their tendency to perceive stressful situations as less dangerous or threatening.

In summary, with the increasing incidence of separation and divorce in Canada, the need for effective post-divorce intervention programs is obvious. The results of this study suggest that a significant improvement can occur among the participants of an intervention program when a group-based program is used that includes communication skills, knowledge of the stages of uncoupling, cognitive-behavioural strategies such as visualization, relaxation and goal-setting, and an opportunity for individual expressions of feeling and concerns. This approach appears to assist adults of divorce in dealing with anxiety and depressions and can result in an increased ability to cope with the trauma of marital dissolution.

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