

Therapeutic notepad for couples – The path to shared happiness



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ABSTRACT

Human beings have an inherent need and desire to build relationships and, when these relationships are healthy, they can lead to better mental health and emotional well-being. A satisfactory marital relationship brings a number of benefits to the individual, such as life satisfaction and emotional health. Research suggests that social support and the emotional impact of a committed relationship can be a buffer against stress, which can contribute to happiness.

The present study aims to understand the usefulness and practicability of a therapeutic notepad for married couples, composed by inspirational quotes and tasks, underlying happiness and well-being,

elaborated and materialized by the first author in the course of her 30 years of clinical practice.

A total of 60 couples participated in this study, with a total of 120 individuals, aged between 28 and 64 years ($M=43.34$; $SD=12.43$), equally distributed by sex.

Firstly, a sociodemographic questionnaire was applied to collect personal data, then the Marital Scale (EMS) ENRICH (assessment and nurturing of relationship, communication and happiness issues) was administered, which translates into a fifteen-item instrument: ten of the items on the scale survey concern marital quality domains, while the other items compose a scale of marital conventionalization to correct the tendency to endorse unrealistically positive descriptions of marriage. Finally, a semi-structured interview was conducted to understand the functionality of the therapeutic notepad for couples. The results showed, both qualitatively and quantitatively, that the agenda can be assumed as a resource that promotes the happiness and well-being of a couple, as well as the reduction of the negative mood of both each individual and each other. This study focuses on the importance of well-being and happiness in the daily life of a marital relationship. This is an important contribution, as it allows us to assess that the therapeutic notebook for couples can lead to positive and encouraging results when applied.

Keywords: Well-being, Happiness, Couples Therapy.

1 INTRODUCTION

Humans have an inherent need and desire to build interpersonal bonds, and when these relationships are healthy, they can promote better mental health and emotional well-being (Seltman, 2012). A satisfying marital relationship brings with it a number of benefits for the individual, such as life satisfaction and emotional balance. The literature indicates that the social and emotional support of a committed relationship can act as a buffer against stress, thus contributing to happiness (Block et al., 2022).



The literature demonstrates a series of evidences that support the hypothesis that the desire for interpersonal connections, i.e., the need to belong, is a fundamental motivation for human beings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The need to belong refers to the strong, pervasive, and universal human motive to develop lasting, positive, and meaningful relationships with other people. This motif evolved through natural selection, because in our hominid ancestors, those who were motivated to establish and maintain connections with others were the ones who were more likely to survive and reproduce, rather than those who did not strive to be accepted and maintain social connections (Fiske, 2006; Leary, 2022).

Today, as a result of the need to belong, people often behave in ways that increase the likelihood of being socially accepted and decrease the likelihood of being rejected (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). For example, people may try to increase their relational value to others by being successful, complying with social norms, by being sociable, agreeable, and physically attractive. Generally, the formation or strengthening of social bonds produces positive emotions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), while rejection and real, imagined, or potential threats to social bonds generate a variety of negative emotional states, including feelings of hurt, social anxiety, jealousy, embarrassment, frustration, guilt, and shame (Leary, 2022). In addition, people devote a disproportionate amount of thought and cognitive processing to partners in actual or potential relationships and interactions, demonstrating more extensive and favorable information processing patterns for those with whom they share social ties (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Although this motivation to be accepted and to belong to society is inherent to the population, each person differs in the form and intensity of their need to belong (Leary, 2022).

Pathological behaviors, ranging from eating disorders to suicide, are more common in people without social ties. People need frequent interactions that are affectively pleasant or positive with the same individuals, and these interactions should occur in a context of long-term care and concern (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The importance of belonging in human psychological functioning has significant implications in the treatment of emotional and behavioral problems. Problems such as anxiety, depression, bereavement, loneliness, and relationship difficulties often result from people's inability to meet their needs for belonging. Just as a series of neurotic, maladaptive, and destructive behaviors can be the result of an exalted attempt to establish or maintain relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Marital satisfaction, a variable in the present study, is a complex and subjective concept widely used to evaluate relationships between couples. It involves feelings of warmth, security, and well-being, in addition to expectations regarding exchanges in the relationship (Gomes, 2016; Silva, 2020; Braz, 2010; Villa, 2005; Norgren et al., 2004). The way couples manage their family and professional responsibilities and the quality of communication are crucial aspects for marital satisfaction, as conflicts between these areas can negatively affect the assessment of marital satisfaction. Marital



satisfaction tends to vary throughout the couple's life cycle, following a U-shaped pattern, where it is high at the beginning of the relationship, decreases during parenting, and rises again when the children leave home. Intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual factors influence marital satisfaction, including personality characteristics, communication styles, conflict resolution, and stressful events in partners' lives and health (Whisman, 2019).

Marital satisfaction is also related to the health and well-being of partners, affecting flexibility in managing life pressures, the risk of psychopathology, adjustment, longevity, and overall health. In addition, marital satisfaction plays an important role in quality of life in late adulthood. Research on the impact of couples therapy has been substantially positive (Lebow, 2020; Baucom & Crenshaw, 2019; Henggeler & Schaeffer, 2016; Wiebe & Johnson, 2016). Additionally, couples therapy is considered effective in reducing client distress and can be valuable for couples facing difficulties in their romantic relationship (Lebow et al., 2012).

However, it is important to note that many couples facing relationship problems do not seek professional help. Only a small percentage of couples who divorce report seeking professional help to improve their marriage, and those who did often waited an average of 6 years after the serious problems arose. In addition, even currently married couples often do not seek professional help for their marital problems, and psychotherapists need to be aware of the reasons that lead couples to seek therapy, as well as the reasons that may not be communicated. The success of marital therapy often depends on the suitability of the treatment to the specific needs and expectations of the clients (Crane et al., 1986). In this way, understanding the reasons behind seeking couples therapy is crucial for the success of couples therapy.

The Therapeutic Alliance is arguably the most important common factor influencing both patient adherence and outcome (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993; Horvath & Symonds, 1991; Lambert, 2015; Machado & Eizirik, 2016; Oliveira & da Cruz, 2015). The therapeutic alliance has an empirical history dating back at least 40 years, with much of this research demonstrating its predictive validity for treatment outcomes (Muran et al., 2010; Crits-Christoph et al., 2011; Fernández et al., 2009; Horvath et al., 2011; Horvath & Luborsky, 1993; Horvath & Symonds, 1991; Martin et al., 2000).

Bordin (1979) identified in his studies three key elements that are fundamental in the construction of a solid therapeutic alliance: first, the agreement between the patient and the therapist regarding the goals of the treatment; second, agreement on the tasks to be carried out; and, finally, the importance of developing a bond of trust and bond between the therapist-patient duo. The concept of Therapeutic Alliance (TA) proposed by Bordin (1979) is notable because it transcends the theoretical differences between various approaches to psychotherapy, being considered a concept that is not linked to any specific theory. As a result, many therapeutic theories and practices rely on Bordin's work as a reference point (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003; Oliveira & Benetti, 2015).



In the case of marital therapy, there is a therapeutic alliance divided into couples. The literature indicates that when one partner has a significantly different level of therapeutic alliance from the other, problems in treatment and outcomes often arise (Lebow et al., 2011). Therefore, it is essential to devote considerable attention to the challenging task of balancing the therapeutic alliances of each member of the couple.

In order to improve marital quality and satisfaction, this study explores the scientific validation of a therapeutic block for couples, created by the first author and published as a self-help book (Santos, 2023).

2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study aimed to understand and verify the clinical utility and therapeutic power of the Therapeutic Notepad for Couples, built by the first author, Santos (2023). This notepad is mainly based on the clinical practice that has been going on for three decades and the feedback the author/the clinician (Santos) has been having with the tasks prescribed to the couples she receives in couples therapy.

The therapeutic tool consists of a theoretical framework for couples therapy, followed by inspirational quotes and tasks underlying marital happiness and satisfaction. This aims to be a space for growth and reflection, as a couple, where each partner reflects on their state of well-being and happiness together, as well as the ability to adapt and integrate into society as a couple.

The present study, of quantitative and qualitative nature, aimed to address, on the one hand, the practicality of a Therapeutic Notepad in couples and, at the same time, promote the happiness and satisfaction of the members of the relationship, thus providing a better quality of life as a couple and reducing the possible negative mood among the participants.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 PARTICIPANTS

Initially, 60 heterosexual couples were included in the study, out of a total of 120 participants, equally distributed by sex, aged between 28 and 64 years, with a mean of 43.34 (SD=12.43). In 75.0% of the couples (n=45), both elements were employed, in a total of 90 participants. In the remaining 15 couples, six men were unemployed, three women were unemployed and in six couples both were students. The most frequent marital status was married, with 36 couples (60.0%), followed by de civil partnership with 18 couples (30.0%) and, finally, boyfriends and girlfriends, with six couples (10.0%) participants.

The degree of marital satisfaction ranged from not at all satisfied, somewhat satisfied (n=46, 38.3%), moderately satisfied (n=62, 51.7%), and very satisfied (n=12, 10%).



As inclusion criteria, individuals aged 18 years or older, educated, were defined, in order to understand and consequently answer the questions posed, and to be in a loving relationship attending couples therapy. During the study, two couples dropped out (a total of four participants dropped out) were identified, as only 116 individuals responded to the data collection instruments administered before and after the completion of the therapeutic tasks.

3.2 MATERIAL

In order to collect socio-demographic information about the participants, as is the case of age, gender, professional status, marital status and degree of satisfaction with life, a sociodemographic questionnaire was applied.

At the same time, and to assess the degree of marital satisfaction, the Portuguese version of the reduced ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) scale was applied (Fowers & Olson, 1993). This instrument was validated for the Portuguese population by Marques (2001) and consists of 15 items, subdivided into two subscales: Idealist Distortion (ID) and Marital Satisfaction (MS). The Idealist Distortion subscale is composed of five items that seek to assess the presence of unrealistically positive idealizations and descriptions in marriage. While the Marital Satisfaction subscale is composed of ten items, which assess the number of different domains present in the marital relationship, such as: Personality Issues, Communication, Conflict Resolution, Financial Management, Leisure Activities, Sexual Relationships, Children and Parents, Family and Friends, Egalitarian Roles and Religious Orientation (Fowers & Olson, 1993). The individual has to indicate for each area his/her answer on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree. The scale score is performed by summing the items and inverting the values of items 2, 5, 8, 9, 12 and 14. The higher the score obtained, the greater the psychological well-being perceived by the individual.

In the present study, good overall internal consistency ($\alpha=0.85$) was obtained, and it is pertinent to mention that the idealist distortion subscale had an alpha of 0.81 and the Marital Satisfaction subscale had an alpha of 0.83, in line with the original psychometric values, and adequate levels of global internal consistency translate into alphas of 0.86 (Fowers & Olson, 1993).

Finally, and taking into account the Therapeutic Notepad for Couples, this material was built by the psychotherapist who mentored the study (Santos, 2023) and stems from years of clinical practice in couples and used in this study to understand its usefulness and clinical validity, being composed of a theoretical framework regarding couple therapy, by inspirational quotes and thoughts and, finally, by tasks, which participants can share with their partners and is not of a mandatory nature. The primary objective of these tasks is to help the elements of the relationship towards well-being and marital happiness. Thus, a semi-structured interview was conducted, used to understand the functionality and applicability of this material.



3.3 PROCEDURES

At first, and after choosing the scale and elaborating the sociodemographic questionnaire, a pre-test and a post-test were carried out, in which structural and semantic changes emerged. Consequently, a form was administered, in which no data would be included that would allow the identification of the participants. This protocol was disseminated in the couple's therapy consultations.

All participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the study, and were guaranteed the anonymity and confidentiality of the data. Data collection took place, in the first moment, between October 2022 and February 2023, and in the second moment, between March and July 2023, where the therapeutic tasks were administered as a couple.

The present study is in accordance with the ethical principles of scientific research, as defined by the Order of Portuguese Psychologists (OPP), as well as in accordance with the guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) regarding the conduct of studies in humans.

Finally, the collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 29.0 (CORPORATION, 2022).

3.4 STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS, version 29.0 (IBM Corp. 2022). Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate internal consistency, with an acceptable limit of $\alpha > 0.70$ (Nunnally, 1978). Total marital satisfaction was calculated by the formula: $\text{marital satisfaction} - [(\text{marital satisfaction}) * (\text{correlation between marital satisfaction and idealistic distortion})^2 * (\text{marital satisfaction} * 0.01)]$, with higher scores suggesting greater total marital satisfaction.

Absolute (n) and relative frequencies (%) were used to characterize the sample and describe the variables, as well as mean (M) and standard deviations (SD) in the continuous variables after confirming the normality of their distributions. This evaluation was made by observing histograms and Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality tests, used when the sample size is greater than 50. Comparisons of scores from the Idealist Distortion (ID), Marital Satisfaction (MS), and total marital satisfaction (CS) subscales were compared before and after therapy with the Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE) method applicable for paired data, adjusting for gender and age of participants. The level of significance considered for the rejection of the null hypothesis was 5%.

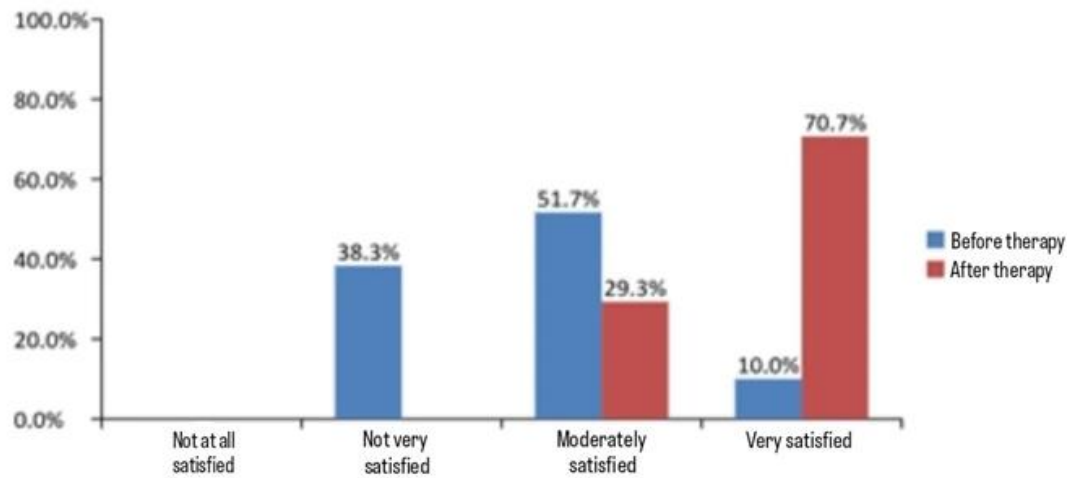
4 RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the general perception of marital satisfaction, assessed with a question whose scale ranged from not at all satisfied, little satisfied, moderately satisfied and very satisfied. After the therapy, the level of satisfaction was much higher, with 70.7% of the participants being very satisfied



after the therapy. Two couples who were unsatisfied before therapy dropped out in the middle of the process and were therefore not included in the study after therapy.

Figure 1. Assessment of satisfaction before and after therapy



All participants reported a change in behavior on the part of their partner, as well as understood that the therapeutic block is a useful tool for improving well-being as a couple, 98 (81.7%) reported that the therapeutic block helped completely and 22 (18.3%) that it helped a lot.

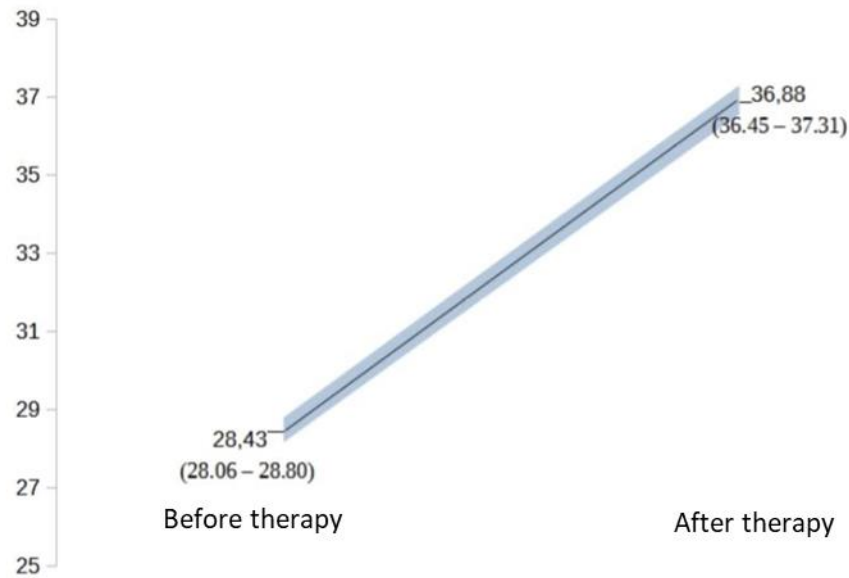
Regarding the usefulness of the therapeutic block, 90 (75.0%) participants indicated that it promotes role reflection, communication, identification of dysfunctional patterns and monitoring of routines. The remaining 30 (25.0%) reported four of these indicators. Regarding the help that the therapeutic block provides in the levels, namely quality time together, recovering positive aspects, forgiving, discovering new interests and others, almost all participants (n=110, 91.7%) marked at least three indicators. When the participants answered others, the answers "listen to me more" (n=14), "are more tolerant" (n=12), "are calmer" (n=10), "talk in other ways" (n=8), "praise me more" (n=6) and "help more with tasks" (n=6) stand out.

Below are the results regarding the evolution of total marital satisfaction, adjusted for gender and age of the participants. In this way, a more robust analysis is achieved, since by controlling the effects of these variables, the effect of the therapy is observed regardless of being a man/woman or age.

Figure 2 shows the results of the assessment of total marital satisfaction before and after therapy adjusted for gender and age, with the calculation of 95% confidence intervals for the estimates. Prior to therapy, total marital satisfaction levels averaged 28.43 (SD=3.65), with a 95% confidence interval between (28.06 – 28.80). After therapy, and controlling for the effect of these variables, the observed effect was $\beta=8.45$ (SE=1.43), $p<0.001$, placing the mean total marital satisfaction at 36.88 (SD=4.23), with a 95% confidence interval of (36.45 – 37.31).



Figure 2. Assessment of total marital satisfaction before and after therapy adjusted for gender and age



Before therapy: 28,43 (28.06 - 28.80)
After therapy: 36,88 (36.45 - 37.31)

5 DISCUSSION

This study focuses on the importance of well-being and happiness in the daily life of a marital relationship. In summary, the results showed both qualitatively and quantitatively that the notepad mentioned above can be assumed as a resource that promotes the happiness and well-being of a couple.

Thus, it can be concluded that the results showed, both qualitatively and quantitatively, that the Therapeutic Notepad can be assumed as a resource that promotes the happiness and well-being of a couple, as well as the reduction of negative mood both of each individual and of each other. This study focuses on the importance of well-being and happiness in the daily life of a marital relationship. This is an important contribution, as it allows us to assess that the notepad can lead to positive and encouraging results when implemented.

Couples in difficulty come into treatment demoralized about their relationships. This state of demoralization with which couples enter treatment often leads to questions such as "Can this relationship be helped?" The data from the research carried out by Lebow (2011) allows for a strong and unequivocal answer: *"Yes, you may not feel hopeful right now, but three out of four couples who complete the therapeutic process come out of their relationship much happier."* In a world where people increasingly want evidence to enable them to make realistic assessments of their current circumstances, there is evidence that most treatments help and that relationships in conflict can actually improve (Lebow, 2011). These results are in line with what was reported in the current study.

Marriages are fragile in our society and families are exposed to countless stresses throughout their lives. The literature shows that almost all treatments that have been studied over long periods of



follow-up have increased effects over long periods (Lebow et al., 2011). In Lebow's (2011) clinical practice, the author reports that he emphasizes an ongoing action plan to work on issues outside of therapy during couples therapy, which can easily be continued after therapy. The present Notepad studied is an example of what can be used for the same purpose. However, whether or not couples keep their relationship in focus and continue to work on good enough communication about problems is highly influenced by the couple's motivation and life circumstances (Lebow, 2011). Similarly, the tasks and learnings in the Notepad for Couples also allow them to be used in the long term.

When considering the results of the present study, it is important to take into account the limitations. Firstly, the couples surveyed had a high level of education and showed from the outset a motivation that was already in itself and in itself potentiating the change (which is assumed that whoever acquires it, that is, who buys a book, is already motivated by some kind of change, by acquiring new knowledge). Namely, the fact that the sample of participants was only with heterosexual couples also appears as a limitation to the study, as well as the convenience sample. Future research should be more inclusive in order to better understand the applicability of the therapeutic tool in the general population.

Couples seeking marital therapy may tend to be more educated and less ethnically diverse than the general population (Doss et al., 2004), and the same occurred in the present study. It is also possible that the nature and obstacles to marital therapy (e.g., lack of third-party coverage of payment) make marital therapy more attractive to middle- and upper-middle-class couples. Unfortunately, no major community studies have been carried out to answer this question.

In terms of implications, the results indicate that interventions such as the Therapeutic Notepad can be beneficial to improve the quality of marital relationships. This can inspire the development of relationship improvement programs or workshops that use similar tools and techniques to help couples strengthen their bonds and promote well-being. Future studies could investigate the impact of the Therapeutic Block on couples from diverse cultural backgrounds or facing specific challenges, such as long-distance relationships or blended families. This would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of its applicability. Future studies may also explore how these positive effects persist over time and whether there are specific strategies or interventions that can maintain and increase marital satisfaction over the years.



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