



The Effectiveness of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy on Attachment Injuries, Dyadic Trust, and Marital Forgiveness among Couples Experiencing Infidelity-Related Distress

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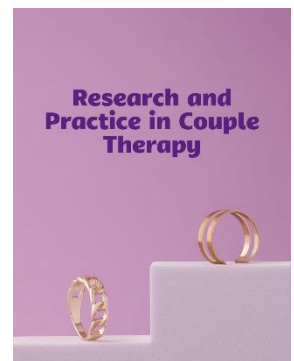
ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFCT) on attachment injuries, dyadic trust, and marital forgiveness among couples experiencing distress related to emotional or sexual infidelity. This study employed a quasi-experimental design with pretest, posttest, and three-month follow-up assessments using an experimental and a waitlist control group. The population consisted of couples seeking counseling services for infidelity-related relationship problems in Canada during 2025–2026. Following screening procedures, 60 couples (120 individuals) who met the inclusion criteria were selected and randomly assigned to either the experimental group (30 couples) or the control group (30 couples). Participants in the experimental group received twelve weekly 90-minute sessions of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy, whereas the control group received no intervention during the study period. Data were collected using the Attachment Injury Resolution Scale, the Dyadic Trust Scale, and the Marital Forgiveness Scale. The data were analyzed using repeated-measures multivariate analysis of variance and Bonferroni post hoc comparisons in SPSS version 29. The results of repeated-measures multivariate analysis of variance revealed significant effects of time, group, and Time \times Group interaction for all dependent variables. Significant interaction effects were found for attachment injuries ($F = 103.84, p < .001, \eta^2 = .66$), dyadic trust ($F = 95.76, p < .001, \eta^2 = .62$), and marital forgiveness ($F = 129.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .72$), indicating that participants receiving EFCT experienced significantly greater improvements than those in the control group. Bonferroni pairwise comparisons demonstrated significant reductions in attachment injuries and significant increases in dyadic trust and marital forgiveness from pretest to posttest and from pretest to follow-up ($p < .001$). No significant differences were observed between posttest and follow-up scores, indicating maintenance of treatment gains across the follow-up period. The findings indicate that Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy is an effective intervention for couples experiencing infidelity-related distress. By addressing attachment-related vulnerabilities and promoting emotionally corrective interactions, EFCT significantly reduced attachment injuries while enhancing dyadic trust and marital forgiveness. The sustained improvements observed at follow-up suggest that the intervention facilitates enduring changes in relational functioning and supports long-term recovery following experiences of betrayal.

Keywords: Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy; Infidelity; Attachment Injuries; Dyadic Trust; Marital Forgiveness; Affair Recovery; Couple Therapy; Attachment Theory.

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Introduction

Infidelity is widely recognized as one of the most distressing and destabilizing events that can occur within an intimate relationship. The discovery of an emotional, sexual, or online affair often challenges fundamental assumptions about commitment, safety, exclusivity, and trust, creating profound emotional consequences for both partners. Contemporary research



conceptualizes infidelity not merely as a violation of relational agreements but as a relational trauma capable of producing symptoms similar to those associated with traumatic stress, including intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance, emotional dysregulation, anger, grief, and relational insecurity (Weiser et al., 2022; Wilkinson & Dunlop, 2020). As romantic relationships serve as primary attachment bonds in adulthood, acts of betrayal frequently threaten the attachment system itself, resulting in significant disruptions to emotional security and interpersonal functioning.

The prevalence and complexity of infidelity have contributed to increasing scholarly attention toward understanding its causes, manifestations, and consequences. Research suggests that infidelity emerges through a combination of individual vulnerabilities, relational dissatisfaction, attachment insecurities, communication difficulties, unmet emotional needs, and contextual influences (Keleş et al., 2022; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Shrestha et al., 2023). Although infidelity can take diverse forms, ranging from emotional involvement to sexual relationships outside the primary partnership, its consequences often extend beyond the specific behavior itself and affect broader aspects of relationship functioning. Individuals who experience betrayal frequently report decreased relationship satisfaction, diminished trust, increased conflict, emotional withdrawal, and uncertainty regarding the future of the relationship (Curtis et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2021).

Recent investigations have emphasized that recovery from infidelity is not a singular event but rather a multifaceted process involving emotional healing, relational reconstruction, and renegotiation of trust and commitment. Injured partners commonly struggle with feelings of rejection, abandonment, humiliation, and loss of emotional safety, whereas involved partners often experience guilt, shame, defensiveness, and fear regarding the survival of the relationship (Fife et al., 2023; Mitchell et al., 2025). Studies exploring the perspectives of both injured and involved partners demonstrate that recovery requires substantial emotional work from both individuals and frequently unfolds over an extended period (Mitchell et al., 2025; Mitchell et al., 2021). Furthermore, qualitative findings indicate that successful recovery involves not only behavioral changes but also the reconstruction of emotional bonds and the development of new relational meanings surrounding the betrayal experience (Fife et al., 2023; Walravens & Rober, 2023).

Among the most significant consequences of infidelity are attachment injuries. Attachment injuries refer to relational traumas that occur when an individual perceives a partner as unavailable, abandoning, rejecting, or betraying them during moments of vulnerability. Such injuries become particularly salient because they violate expectations regarding responsiveness, protection, and emotional accessibility within intimate relationships. From an attachment perspective, infidelity constitutes one of the most severe forms of attachment injury because it directly challenges the security of the attachment bond and often generates persistent fears concerning abandonment and relational instability (Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2023; Jean et al., 2024). Research consistently demonstrates that attachment insecurities are associated with greater emotional distress, increased unforgiveness, and poorer adjustment following relational transgressions (Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2023; Jean et al., 2024). Consequently, addressing attachment injuries has become a central objective in therapeutic interventions designed for couples affected by betrayal.

Another critical construct in the aftermath of infidelity is dyadic trust. Trust functions as a foundational component of healthy intimate relationships and facilitates emotional vulnerability, cooperation, predictability, and commitment. When infidelity occurs, trust is often severely damaged because the betrayed partner experiences a discrepancy between previously held assumptions and newly acquired information regarding the partner's behavior. The erosion of trust may subsequently contribute to suspicion, monitoring behaviors, emotional distancing, and recurrent conflict. A recent systematic review highlighted trust repair as one of the most challenging yet essential aspects of relationship recovery after betrayal and emphasized the need for interventions that directly address emotional processes underlying trust reconstruction (Giacobbi & Lalot, 2025). Research examining post-infidelity relationships further indicates that trust restoration is strongly associated with

relationship satisfaction, commitment, forgiveness, and long-term relational stability (Mitchell et al., 2025; Walravens & Rober, 2023).

Marital forgiveness also represents a crucial factor in the healing process following infidelity. Forgiveness does not imply forgetting or condoning the betrayal; rather, it involves a gradual reduction in resentment, hostility, avoidance, and revenge motivations while fostering more constructive emotional responses toward the offending partner. Studies have demonstrated that forgiveness contributes significantly to emotional recovery, relationship satisfaction, and psychological well-being among couples experiencing relational transgressions (Jean et al., 2024; Kasprzak, 2025). Conversely, persistent unforgiveness has been associated with elevated distress, attachment insecurity, interpersonal hostility, and relationship dissolution (Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2023). The significance of forgiveness becomes particularly evident when considering evidence suggesting that revenge-oriented responses and chronic resentment can intensify relational dysfunction and hinder reconciliation efforts (Clemente & Espinosa, 2021). Accordingly, marital forgiveness is frequently considered a key outcome in therapeutic interventions designed to facilitate recovery after infidelity.

The psychological consequences of infidelity extend beyond relational functioning and often affect broader aspects of individual well-being. Research has linked experiences of betrayal to symptoms of post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and emotional dysregulation (Jules et al., 2023; Karadzhy, 2023). The discovery of infidelity may also challenge an individual's sense of identity, self-worth, and worldview, leading to prolonged psychological suffering. Studies examining undisclosed infidelity emphasize the unique challenges associated with secrecy and delayed disclosure, which may further intensify emotional trauma and complicate therapeutic intervention (Curtis et al., 2021). Similarly, clinical reports suggest that infidelity-related distress frequently co-occurs with other relational difficulties, including sexual dissatisfaction, communication breakdowns, and reductions in emotional intimacy (Alexander, 2022; Crawford et al., 2023).

Given the substantial impact of infidelity on individuals and relationships, considerable attention has been directed toward the development and evaluation of therapeutic approaches aimed at facilitating recovery. Various intervention models have demonstrated promising outcomes. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy-based interventions have been shown to improve intimacy, forgiveness, emotional regulation, and attitudes toward infidelity among affected individuals and couples (Najibzadegan et al., 2024; Yousefpouri et al., 2024). Similarly, schema therapy has been associated with improvements in relationship quality and emotion regulation among couples coping with betrayal-related challenges (Pasha et al., 2024). Acceptance and commitment-based couple therapy has also demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing communication patterns and reducing marital infidelity-related problems (Khaneghazi et al., 2024). Group-based interventions have further shown potential for supporting couples as they navigate the complexities of betrayal and relationship repair (Ripoll-Núñez & Gordon, 2024).

Additional evidence supports the effectiveness of integrative and behavioral approaches for addressing the consequences of infidelity. Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy provides a comprehensive framework for understanding affair recovery and emphasizes acceptance, emotional understanding, and behavioral change processes (Mairal & Polanski, 2021). Preventive and psychoeducational interventions have likewise demonstrated benefits in reducing the negative relational and health consequences associated with deception and betrayal within intimate relationships (Puigvert et al., 2022). Furthermore, emerging interventions targeting attachment trauma and forgiveness, such as online Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing protocols adapted for couples, have yielded encouraging findings regarding trauma symptom reduction, conflict resolution, and forgiveness enhancement (Davidar et al., 2025).

Among the various therapeutic approaches available, Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFCT) occupies a particularly important position due to its explicit emphasis on attachment processes and emotional bonding. Grounded in attachment theory

and experiential principles, EFCT conceptualizes relationship distress as arising from negative interactional cycles that undermine emotional security and accessibility between partners. The primary objective of EFCT is to help couples identify maladaptive interaction patterns, access underlying attachment-related emotions, and create corrective emotional experiences that strengthen attachment bonds. Because infidelity frequently represents a severe attachment injury, EFCT appears especially well suited for addressing the emotional consequences of betrayal and facilitating relational healing.

Empirical evidence increasingly supports the effectiveness of emotionally focused interventions in improving relational functioning among distressed couples. Research has demonstrated that Emotionally Focused Therapy contributes to increases in marital forgiveness, marital harmony, and sexual assertiveness among maladjusted couples (Behrang et al., 2022). Additional studies indicate that emotionally focused approaches improve intimacy, marital adjustment, and forgiveness among couples with histories of extramarital affairs (Torani & Fard, 2024). Emotion-focused interventions have also been shown to enhance sexual functioning and marital intimacy among women affected by marital infidelity (Nezamalmolki et al., 2023). Moreover, evidence suggests that emotion-focused approaches may alleviate marital boredom and improve self-esteem among individuals experiencing marital conflict (Hashemizadeh et al., 2023). These findings collectively support the theoretical proposition that emotional accessibility and attachment security play central roles in relationship recovery.

Despite the growing body of literature, important gaps remain. Existing studies have often focused on general indicators of relationship functioning such as marital satisfaction, intimacy, communication, or adjustment, while comparatively less attention has been directed toward examining the simultaneous impact of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy on attachment injuries, dyadic trust, and marital forgiveness among couples experiencing infidelity-related distress. Given that attachment injury, trust disruption, and forgiveness difficulties represent three of the most significant challenges confronting couples after betrayal, investigating these variables within a unified framework may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of therapeutic recovery processes. Furthermore, contemporary models of affair recovery increasingly emphasize the interconnected nature of attachment security, trust repair, and forgiveness development, suggesting that effective interventions should address these dimensions concurrently rather than independently (Fife et al., 2022; Giacobbi & Lalot, 2025; Tadros et al., 2022).

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to investigate the effectiveness of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy on attachment injuries, dyadic trust, and marital forgiveness among couples experiencing infidelity-related distress.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest–posttest and three-month follow-up assessment, incorporating an experimental group and a waitlist control group. The research was conducted in Canada between 2025 and 2026 among married couples seeking psychological services for relationship difficulties associated with infidelity-related distress. Participants were recruited through advertisements distributed in couple counseling centers, family therapy clinics, community mental health agencies, and online support networks across the provinces of Ontario and British Columbia. The target population consisted of heterosexual and same-sex married or cohabiting couples who had experienced at least one documented episode of emotional or sexual infidelity within the previous two years and who reported clinically significant relational distress attributable to the infidelity incident.

An initial screening process was conducted using structured clinical interviews administered by licensed marriage and family therapists. Couples were considered eligible if they had been in a committed relationship for a minimum of two years,

were between 25 and 60 years of age, demonstrated sufficient proficiency in English to complete the assessment measures, and expressed a mutual willingness to participate in couple therapy. Exclusion criteria included severe domestic violence, active substance dependence, psychotic disorders, acute suicidal ideation, ongoing extradyadic relationships at the time of enrollment, and concurrent participation in another structured couple intervention program.

A total of 86 couples were assessed for eligibility. Following screening procedures, 60 couples (120 individuals) met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate in the study. Participants were randomly assigned to either the Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFCT) group (30 couples) or the waitlist control group (30 couples). The experimental group received a structured EFCT intervention consisting of twelve weekly sessions, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. The intervention was delivered by certified therapists who had completed advanced training in Emotionally Focused Therapy and received ongoing supervision throughout the study. The control group received no formal therapeutic intervention during the study period but was offered treatment after completion of the follow-up assessment. All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation, and the study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles governing research involving human participants.

Measures

Attachment injuries were assessed using the Attachment Injury Resolution Scale developed by Makinen and Johnson (2006). This instrument was specifically designed to evaluate unresolved attachment-related emotional wounds within intimate relationships, particularly those arising from experiences of betrayal, abandonment, rejection, or infidelity. The scale consists of 24 items that assess the severity of attachment injuries and the extent to which partners have processed and resolved these experiences. Respondents rate each statement on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate greater levels of unresolved attachment injury and emotional distress associated with attachment-related relational trauma. The instrument encompasses dimensions such as emotional pain, relational insecurity, trust disruption, emotional withdrawal, and attachment-related vulnerability. Previous studies have demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties for the scale, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding .85 and evidence supporting its construct, convergent, and discriminant validity across clinical and non-clinical populations.

Dyadic trust was measured using the Dyadic Trust Scale developed by Larzelere and Huston (1980). This widely utilized instrument assesses the degree of trust, confidence, reliability, and predictability perceived within intimate relationships. The scale contains 8 items scored on a seven-point Likert continuum ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Higher scores reflect greater trust and confidence in one's partner. The instrument evaluates core aspects of interpersonal trust, including honesty, dependability, emotional safety, consistency, and confidence in the partner's intentions and behaviors. The Dyadic Trust Scale has been extensively used in marital and family research and has demonstrated strong internal consistency, with reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients typically ranging from .82 to .93. Previous validation studies have confirmed the scale's factorial stability and criterion validity among diverse samples of married and cohabiting couples.

Marital forgiveness was assessed using the Marital Forgiveness Scale developed by Paleari, Regalia, and Fincham (2009). This self-report instrument measures spouses' willingness to reduce resentment, overcome negative emotions, and restore positive relational attitudes following interpersonal transgressions. The scale consists of 30 items distributed across three dimensions: benevolence, avoidance reduction, and revenge reduction. Participants respond using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher total scores indicate greater levels of forgiveness toward one's spouse. The instrument captures cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components of forgiveness and is particularly suitable for assessing forgiveness processes in relationships affected by betrayal and infidelity. Previous investigations have reported

excellent reliability coefficients above .90 and strong evidence for construct validity, convergent validity, and cross-cultural applicability. The scale has been successfully employed in numerous studies examining marital recovery, reconciliation, and relationship healing following relational injuries.

Intervention

The intervention consisted of a structured Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFCT) protocol delivered over twelve weekly sessions, each lasting approximately 90 minutes, designed specifically to address infidelity-related distress and attachment injuries. The protocol began with sessions focused on assessment, building therapeutic alliance, and identifying negative interactional cycles that perpetuate relational distress. Subsequent sessions emphasized eliciting primary attachment emotions, facilitating emotional disclosure of hurt and betrayal, and helping each partner articulate unmet attachment needs. Mid-phase sessions targeted de-escalation of conflictual patterns, fostering empathic responses, and promoting mutual understanding and validation. In the final phase, the intervention concentrated on restructuring interactions to create new patterns of emotional engagement, strengthening dyadic trust, and cultivating marital forgiveness through exercises aimed at rebuilding relational bonds, reinforcing commitment, and enhancing emotional accessibility. The therapy was delivered by certified EFCT practitioners who received ongoing supervision to ensure fidelity to the model, and the sessions integrated experiential exercises, emotion-focused interventions, and communication strategies tailored to the unique context of infidelity recovery.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29. Prior to hypothesis testing, descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis values were calculated to evaluate the distributional characteristics of the study variables. Assumptions underlying parametric analyses were examined through tests of normality, homogeneity of variances, and equality of covariance matrices. Missing data were inspected and managed using expectation-maximization procedures when appropriate. Baseline equivalence between groups was assessed using independent-samples t-tests and chi-square analyses.

To evaluate the effectiveness of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy on attachment injuries, dyadic trust, and marital forgiveness across time, repeated-measures multivariate analysis of variance (RM-MANOVA) was employed. This analytical approach enabled examination of the main effects of time, group membership, and the interaction between time and group. Significant interaction effects were interpreted as evidence of treatment effectiveness. Effect sizes were calculated using partial eta-squared values to determine the magnitude of intervention effects. Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons were conducted to identify specific differences between pretest, posttest, and follow-up measurements. Statistical significance was established at the .05 level for all analyses. The results of these analyses were used to determine whether participation in Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy led to significant reductions in attachment injuries and significant improvements in dyadic trust and marital forgiveness among couples experiencing infidelity-related distress.

Findings and Results

A total of 60 couples (120 individuals) participated in the study and completed all three assessment phases, including pretest, posttest, and three-month follow-up. The experimental group consisted of 30 couples (60 participants), while the control group included 30 couples (60 participants). The mean age of participants was 38.42 years ($SD = 7.16$), with ages ranging from 26 to 58 years. The average relationship duration was 11.37 years ($SD = 5.28$). Among the participants, 81.7% were legally married

and 18.3% were in long-term cohabiting relationships. Regarding educational attainment, 18.3% held a high school diploma, 46.7% possessed a bachelor's degree, and 35.0% had completed postgraduate education. No statistically significant differences were observed between the experimental and control groups with respect to age, relationship duration, educational level, or relationship status at baseline ($p > .05$), indicating adequate group equivalence before implementation of the intervention.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Attachment Injuries, Dyadic Trust, and Marital Forgiveness Across Measurement Occasions

Variable	Group	Pretest Mean ± SD	Posttest Mean ± SD	Follow-up Mean ± SD
Attachment Injuries	Control	98.43 ± 11.82	97.86 ± 12.14	97.31 ± 11.95
Attachment Injuries	Experimental	99.17 ± 12.25	72.34 ± 10.67	70.58 ± 10.21
Dyadic Trust	Control	24.78 ± 4.35	25.03 ± 4.17	24.91 ± 4.28
Dyadic Trust	Experimental	25.12 ± 4.61	39.47 ± 5.08	40.11 ± 4.89
Marital Forgiveness	Control	82.36 ± 9.71	82.98 ± 9.28	83.14 ± 9.43
Marital Forgiveness	Experimental	81.92 ± 10.04	108.57 ± 9.36	110.43 ± 8.98

As shown in Table 1, the two groups demonstrated highly comparable baseline scores across all study variables. At pretest, participants in both groups reported similarly elevated levels of attachment injuries and relatively low levels of dyadic trust and marital forgiveness. Following the intervention, substantial improvements were observed among couples who received Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy. Specifically, attachment injury scores in the experimental group decreased markedly from a pretest mean of 99.17 to 72.34 at posttest and further declined to 70.58 at follow-up. In contrast, the control group exhibited only negligible changes across assessment periods. Similarly, dyadic trust increased considerably in the experimental group from 25.12 at pretest to 39.47 at posttest and 40.11 at follow-up, whereas trust levels in the control group remained relatively stable. Marital forgiveness also improved substantially among treated couples, increasing from 81.92 at pretest to 108.57 at posttest and 110.43 at follow-up. These descriptive findings suggest that Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy produced meaningful and sustained improvements in relationship functioning among couples experiencing infidelity-related distress.

Table 2. Repeated-Measures Multivariate Analysis of Variance Examining the Effects of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy

Variable	Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	η^2
Attachment Injuries	Time	12846.38	2	6423.19	96.52	.001	.63
	Group	11521.74	1	11521.74	82.16	.001	.59
	Time × Group	13748.21	2	6874.11	103.84	.001	.66
Dyadic Trust	Time	5427.16	2	2713.58	84.93	.001	.59
	Group	4738.92	1	4738.92	71.18	.001	.55
	Time × Group	6114.53	2	3057.27	95.76	.001	.62
Marital Forgiveness	Time	15692.48	2	7846.24	118.41	.001	.69
	Group	12931.76	1	12931.76	92.57	.001	.61
	Time × Group	17184.93	2	8592.47	129.86	.001	.72

The results of the repeated-measures multivariate analysis of variance demonstrated statistically significant effects for time, group, and the interaction between time and group across all outcome variables. The significant time effects indicated that participant scores changed substantially across the three assessment occasions. Significant group effects demonstrated overall differences between couples receiving Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy and those assigned to the control condition. Most importantly, statistically significant Time × Group interaction effects were observed for attachment injuries ($F = 103.84, p < .001, \eta^2 = .66$), dyadic trust ($F = 95.76, p < .001, \eta^2 = .62$), and marital forgiveness ($F = 129.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .72$). These large effect sizes indicate that changes over time differed significantly between groups and that the intervention was highly effective in reducing attachment injuries while simultaneously increasing dyadic trust and marital forgiveness. The magnitude of the

obtained partial eta-squared coefficients suggests that a substantial proportion of variance in relationship outcomes was attributable to participation in Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy.

Table 3. Bonferroni Pairwise Comparisons for the Experimental Group

Variable	Comparison	Mean Difference	Standard Error	p
Attachment Injuries	Pretest – Posttest	26.83	2.41	.001
	Pretest – Follow-up	28.59	2.52	.001
	Posttest – Follow-up	1.76	1.48	.487
Dyadic Trust	Pretest – Posttest	-14.35	1.63	.001
	Pretest – Follow-up	-14.99	1.69	.001
	Posttest – Follow-up	-0.64	0.91	.793
Marital Forgiveness	Pretest – Posttest	-26.65	2.28	.001
	Pretest – Follow-up	-28.51	2.36	.001
	Posttest – Follow-up	-1.86	1.24	.412

The Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons revealed significant improvements from pretest to posttest and from pretest to follow-up across all three outcome variables in the experimental group. Attachment injury scores showed significant reductions between pretest and posttest as well as between pretest and follow-up ($p < .001$). Likewise, dyadic trust and marital forgiveness increased significantly from baseline to both subsequent assessment occasions ($p < .001$). However, comparisons between posttest and follow-up were not statistically significant for any variable, indicating that gains achieved during treatment were successfully maintained throughout the three-month follow-up period. The absence of significant deterioration after treatment completion suggests that the therapeutic benefits of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy remained stable over time. Collectively, these findings provide strong empirical evidence that Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy is effective in helping couples recover from infidelity-related distress by reducing attachment injuries, rebuilding interpersonal trust, and promoting marital forgiveness.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the effectiveness of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFCT) on attachment injuries, dyadic trust, and marital forgiveness among couples experiencing infidelity-related distress. The findings demonstrated that couples who participated in the EFCT intervention exhibited significant reductions in attachment injuries and significant improvements in dyadic trust and marital forgiveness compared with those in the control group. Furthermore, these therapeutic gains were maintained at the three-month follow-up assessment, suggesting that the intervention produced durable and clinically meaningful changes in relationship functioning. These findings provide strong support for the application of attachment-based interventions in the treatment of couples struggling with the aftermath of infidelity and contribute to the growing body of evidence highlighting the effectiveness of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy in addressing relational trauma.

One of the most important findings of the study was the significant reduction in attachment injuries among couples receiving EFCT. This result is theoretically consistent with the core assumptions of attachment theory, which conceptualizes infidelity as a profound violation of attachment security. Attachment injuries occur when one partner perceives the other as unavailable, rejecting, or abandoning during moments of heightened vulnerability. The discovery of infidelity often represents such an experience because it undermines assumptions of emotional safety, responsiveness, and commitment. EFCT directly targets these attachment wounds by helping partners identify underlying emotional needs, express attachment-related fears, and engage in corrective emotional interactions that promote security and responsiveness. Through this process, injured partners gain

opportunities to communicate feelings of betrayal, abandonment, and fear, while involved partners learn to respond with empathy, accountability, and emotional accessibility.

The observed reduction in attachment injuries aligns with previous conceptual and empirical literature emphasizing the centrality of attachment processes in affair recovery. Research has shown that attachment insecurity is associated with greater distress and difficulties in recovering from relational transgressions (Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2023; Jean et al., 2024). Studies exploring the experiences of individuals affected by infidelity have further highlighted the profound emotional wounds and attachment-related fears that emerge following betrayal (Mitchell et al., 2021; Walravens & Rober, 2023). Qualitative investigations have demonstrated that successful recovery requires the restoration of emotional safety and attachment security between partners (Fife et al., 2023; Mitchell et al., 2025). The present findings suggest that EFCT effectively addresses these processes by facilitating emotional engagement and fostering new relational experiences that counteract previous attachment injuries. The results also complement evidence indicating that emotionally focused interventions improve intimacy and emotional connection among couples affected by extramarital relationships (Nezamalmolki et al., 2023; Torani & Fard, 2024).

Another major finding was the significant increase in dyadic trust among couples who participated in EFCT. Trust is one of the most severely damaged aspects of relationships following infidelity. When betrayal occurs, injured partners often question their ability to rely on their spouse, leading to persistent suspicion, uncertainty, and emotional withdrawal. Restoring trust is therefore considered one of the most challenging components of relationship recovery. The present findings indicate that EFCT provides an effective framework for rebuilding trust through emotional responsiveness, vulnerability, and corrective attachment experiences. As partners become more capable of expressing emotions openly and responding sensitively to one another's needs, opportunities emerge for the gradual reconstruction of trust.

These findings are consistent with contemporary research emphasizing trust repair as a critical component of affair recovery. A recent systematic review concluded that trust restoration requires sustained emotional engagement, accountability, transparency, and consistent demonstrations of reliability (Giacobbi & Lalot, 2025). Qualitative studies of couples recovering from infidelity similarly reveal that trust rebuilding is a gradual process involving repeated experiences of emotional safety and relational consistency (Fife et al., 2023; Walravens & Rober, 2023). Research examining the decision-making processes of injured partners has also identified trust restoration as a key determinant of whether couples remain together following betrayal (Mitchell et al., 2025). The current findings extend this literature by demonstrating that EFCT can effectively facilitate trust reconstruction through interventions specifically designed to strengthen attachment bonds and emotional accessibility. Because trust and attachment security are closely interconnected constructs, improvements in one domain may naturally reinforce gains in the other, helping explain the substantial improvements observed in both outcomes.

The study also found that EFCT significantly enhanced marital forgiveness among couples experiencing infidelity-related distress. Forgiveness is widely recognized as a fundamental component of relational healing because it allows individuals to reduce resentment, anger, and revenge motivations while creating opportunities for emotional reconciliation. Following infidelity, many injured partners struggle with intense feelings of hurt and betrayal that can persist long after disclosure. EFCT appears to facilitate forgiveness by encouraging emotional processing, promoting empathic understanding, and helping partners reinterpret the meaning of the betrayal within the broader context of the relationship. As emotional responsiveness increases and attachment security begins to recover, injured partners may become more willing to release destructive emotions and move toward forgiveness.

This finding is highly consistent with previous research demonstrating positive associations between emotionally focused interventions and forgiveness outcomes. Behrang et al. reported that Emotionally Focused Therapy significantly improved marital forgiveness among maladjusted couples (Behrang et al., 2022). Similarly, Torani et al. found that emotion-focused

interventions increased forgiveness among couples with histories of extramarital affairs (Torani & Fard, 2024). Other therapeutic approaches, including integrated couples therapy and acceptance and commitment-based interventions, have also demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing forgiveness among individuals affected by extramarital relationships (Najibzadegan et al., 2024; Salehi et al., 2023). The current findings suggest that forgiveness may emerge as a natural consequence of attachment healing and trust restoration. When partners experience renewed emotional safety and responsiveness, they may become better able to process betrayal-related emotions constructively and develop more compassionate perspectives toward one another.

The maintenance of treatment gains during the follow-up period represents another noteworthy aspect of the findings. The absence of significant deterioration in attachment injuries, trust, or forgiveness after treatment completion suggests that EFCT promotes enduring changes rather than temporary symptom reduction. This durability may be explained by the intervention's emphasis on restructuring interactional patterns and strengthening attachment bonds rather than merely addressing surface-level behavioral symptoms. Once couples learn to recognize negative interaction cycles and replace them with more adaptive forms of emotional engagement, they may continue applying these skills beyond the formal therapy setting. Consequently, improvements become integrated into daily relationship functioning and are more likely to persist over time.

The stability of the intervention effects is consistent with theoretical and empirical work emphasizing that affair recovery involves long-term relational transformation rather than short-term crisis management (Fife et al., 2023; Walravens & Rober, 2023). Research exploring individual and couple healing following infidelity has similarly highlighted the importance of sustained emotional growth, meaning-making, and relational reconstruction (Fife et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2025). The current findings therefore support the notion that EFCT facilitates deep and lasting changes in relational processes that continue to influence couples after therapy has ended.

The results can also be interpreted within the broader literature on emotional regulation and relational functioning. Infidelity often triggers intense emotional responses, including anger, anxiety, shame, grief, and fear. Difficulties managing these emotions may perpetuate conflict and hinder recovery efforts. Several studies have shown that interventions targeting emotional awareness and regulation contribute to improved relationship outcomes among couples affected by infidelity (Pasha et al., 2024; Yousefpouri et al., 2024). Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy may be particularly effective because it not only addresses emotional regulation at the individual level but also transforms how emotions are communicated and responded to within the relationship. By creating a context in which vulnerable emotions can be expressed safely, EFCT reduces defensive reactions and fosters deeper emotional understanding.

The findings are additionally consistent with broader scholarship examining the emotional and psychological consequences of infidelity. Researchers have documented associations between infidelity and post-traumatic stress symptoms, emotional distress, relational dissatisfaction, loneliness, and identity disruption (Jules et al., 2023; Karadzhy, 2023; Rokach & Chan, 2023). Studies of undisclosed infidelity further indicate that betrayal experiences can produce enduring psychological wounds that require specialized therapeutic attention (Curtis et al., 2021). The significant improvements observed in the present study suggest that EFCT may be uniquely positioned to address these challenges because it conceptualizes infidelity as an attachment injury requiring emotional healing rather than merely behavioral correction. This conceptualization is consistent with contemporary understandings of relational trauma and provides a coherent framework for facilitating recovery.

Moreover, the findings complement previous investigations demonstrating the benefits of attachment-oriented and emotionally focused approaches for improving relationship functioning. Research has shown positive effects of emotionally focused interventions on marital harmony, sexual functioning, intimacy, and self-esteem among distressed couples (Behrang et al., 2022; Hashemizadeh et al., 2023; Nezamalmolki et al., 2023). The present study extends this evidence by specifically

demonstrating improvements in attachment injuries, dyadic trust, and marital forgiveness among couples experiencing infidelity-related distress. Together, these findings strengthen the argument that emotional and attachment processes represent critical mechanisms of change in couple therapy and should receive central attention in interventions designed for betrayal recovery.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of the present study. First, the sample was recruited from counseling centers and community settings within Canada, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts and populations. Second, all outcome measures relied on self-report instruments, making the results potentially vulnerable to social desirability bias and participant response tendencies. Third, the follow-up period was limited to three months, preventing conclusions regarding the long-term maintenance of treatment effects over multiple years. Fourth, the study focused exclusively on couples who remained together and were willing to engage in therapy, which may exclude individuals experiencing more severe relational disruption or those who chose relationship dissolution. Finally, potential moderating variables such as gender, attachment style, severity of the infidelity, duration since disclosure, and previous therapeutic experiences were not examined.

Future investigations should examine the effectiveness of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy across more diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic populations to enhance the generalizability of findings. Researchers may also benefit from employing longer follow-up periods extending beyond one year to evaluate the durability of treatment gains over time. Comparative studies examining EFCT alongside other evidence-based interventions for infidelity recovery would further clarify relative effectiveness and mechanisms of change. Future research should additionally explore potential mediators and moderators, including attachment style, emotional regulation, empathy, commitment level, and severity of betrayal. Incorporating qualitative methodologies may provide deeper insight into the lived experiences of couples undergoing recovery and illuminate the specific therapeutic processes that contribute to healing, trust reconstruction, and forgiveness development.

Mental health professionals working with couples affected by infidelity should consider incorporating attachment-focused interventions into treatment planning, particularly when significant trust disruption and emotional injury are present. Therapists may benefit from emphasizing emotional accessibility, vulnerability, and responsiveness as central components of recovery. Clinical training programs should provide greater attention to the assessment and treatment of attachment injuries resulting from relational betrayal. Counseling centers and family therapy clinics may also consider developing specialized programs for affair recovery that integrate psychoeducation, emotional processing, trust rebuilding, and forgiveness enhancement. Finally, practitioners should recognize that recovery from infidelity is often a gradual process requiring patience, empathy, and sustained therapeutic support, and interventions should be designed to address both individual healing and relational transformation simultaneously.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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