

# A Phenomenological Study: Assessing Life Skills in Women Attempting to Divorce

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**Abstract:** *This study aimed to investigate the life skills of women attempting to divorce (WAD). This research was done by the phenomenological method. The data were collected and recorded through individual, in-depth, and semi-structured interviews with 12 women who are attempting to divorce. Data are analyzed by qualitative data coding. The unit of analysis in this study was the sentence. In this paper, nine sub-topics were classified as problem-solving skills, anger management, decision making, effective communication, stress management, expression of feelings and emotions, resiliency, self-awareness, and critical thinking in the main category called life skills. Oral interviews found that all 12 women who participated in the study had problems with nine life skills and were less effective at life issues. Lack of life skills in women can cause problems such as divorce, emotional divorce, infidelity, etc. in the family. Therefore, teaching life skills through educational classes, books, pamphlets, etc. can be useful so that women can fulfill their family and social responsibilities by learning these skills.*

**Keywords:** Life skills, Women attempting to divorce, Phenomenology research

## 1. Introduction

The family is the main unit of any society, which is the center of human growth and excellence. Creating a healthy community is possible through family health, and creating a healthy family is possible when people being mentally healthy and having good relationships with each other (Bernstein and Bernstein, 2003). Today, the issue of marriage and family formation is facing a serious challenge. One of the issues that can cause damage in married life and the loss of a family is divorce. Divorce is a long process and begins with consent to marriage and ends in divorce (Finzi, Cohen & Ram, 2000). One of the most important factors that affect the stability and growth of the family is a healthy relationship based on understanding between family members, especially husband and wife. Optimal marital relationships are the foundation of a family's good performance and develop competencies and increase the ability and adjustment of family members (Edalati&Redzuan, 2010). According to psychologists, divorce is one of the most valid indicators of dissatisfaction in marital relationships and indicates the emotional breakdown of the couple or at least one of them (Korpooral et al., 2013). Undoubtedly, this emotional separation is painful and creates different problems and harms for couples. Thus, divorce is a process that begins due to emotional crises in couples and ends with an attempt to resolve the conflict by entering a new situation and a new lifestyle (Long & Young, 2007).

Nowadays, for a variety of reasons, including rapid social, economic, and cultural change, the institution of the family has suffered greatly, and divorce has increased in recent decades. Research has shown different reasons for the complex phenomenon of divorce. One of the reasons is the lack of life skills in one or both couples. Life skills include abilities that lead to the promotion of mental health in society, the promotion of human relationships, increased

health, and healthy behaviors at the society level. Life skills are used both as a way to promote mental health and as a tool to prevent psycho-social harm. They also promote the level of mental health of the individual and society (World Health Organization, 1998, Fata et al., 2006). Life skills training can increase mental health, satisfaction, and well-being in couples (Burleson & Denton, 1997). In general, life skills include self-awareness, effective communication, stress management, problem-solving, resiliency, critical thinking, decision making, anger management, and expression of feelings and emotions (Jazayeri and Rahimi, 2016).

There are several quantitative studies have suggested that people attempting to divorce have few social and communication skills. Some studies have proven the effectiveness of life skills training on marital adjustment and satisfaction, but there is little research on the qualitative study of life skills, especially for WAD. Due to the research gap, the researcher intends to examine the quality of life skills of some WAD. This study aimed to evaluate the quality of life skills of WAD and finally, it answers the question of what skills do women seeking divorce not have?

## 2. Literature Review (Research Backgrounds and Theoretical Foundations)

### 2.1 Research Backgrounds

A study by Mazzuca, Kafetsios, Levy, & Presaghi (2018) showed that emotion regulation and emotional transmission have an affect on the reduction of differences and the quality of marital relationships.

Beer (2016) in his research pointed to the main role of communication skills in increasing marital satisfaction and also the findings of this study showed that these skills play a

direct and indirect role in marital satisfaction and couple relations.

Bolkan & Kaya (2016) examined the role of life skills training for couples attempting to divorce in their study and concluded that this training was not effective during the divorce process, but made people aware of the lack of these skills in living with each other.

Mehrani (2015) Examined life skills training to reduce marital inconsistency. To do this research, 80 couples were trained and concluded that this training was effective in reducing marital inconsistency.

In a study on 119 Italian couples, Gasbarrini, Snyder, Bertoni, Donato, Margola, and Iafrate(2015) showed that communication skills and coping styles as a moderator of communication between the two indicators of in sexual stressor relations, It expresses relationships with the children and the satisfaction of married life.

Tam, Lee, Foo & Lim (2011) in a study on Malaysian couples found that communication skills played an important role in marital satisfaction, conflict, and mental health.

Gaffel (2010) noted that individual factors (age, education, and socioeconomic status), communication factors (previous psychological and emotional functions or correlation with ex-spouse) and psychological factors (self-esteem, individual coping skills, attitudes, and personal beliefs) are the factors affecting marriage or divorce.

Hulman (2006) also noted that four factors contribute to the success or failure of a marriage, one of which is the interactive processes between the couple and issues such as problem-solving skills, communication, and so on.

## 2.2 Theoretical Foundations

**Social Learning Theory:** The basis of what is used in life skills training is information that is obtained by learning through observing the behavior of others and its social consequences, and is based on Bandura's social learning theory (1997). In Bandura's social learning theory, learning is an active and experiential process, and therefore people learn life skills in an active learning process. Therefore, in this type of training, methods are used that cause active participation of people of different ages and sexual groups. These practices include the formation of small or double groups, intellectual precipitation, discussion, and debate (UNICEF, 2005, 1988).

This theory explains why some people tolerate the pressures and problems of life better than others. **Theory of Risk and Flexibility:** This theory explains why some people tolerate the pressures and problems of life better than others. Flexibility theory relates to internal factors such as self-esteem, the source of internal control, and external factors such as family social support as protective factors that make a person resistant to the risks of poverty, anxiety, drug abuse, and disease. Promoting cognitive-social skills and problem-solving skills are behavioral mediators that increase

flexibility and reduce risk. On the other hand, life skills programs are designed to prevent problematic behaviors (illicit sexual activity, drug abuse) and to promote positive behaviors such as healthy communication with people and adaptation to the home and community environment. Also, in this theory, life skills training in normal populations has been validated. According to this theory, in 2000, the components of life skills included self-management skills and social skills. Self-management skills include decision-making and problem-solving skills, awareness and resistance to social influences, coping with anger and frustration, anxiety, goal setting, self-management and self-empowerment, and social skills include social communication, verbal and nonverbal assertiveness skills, respect and increasing of social competence (Botwin& Griffin, 2004).

## 3. Methods

### Procedure

In the current study, a qualitative research method with a phenomenological approach has been used. Quantitative approaches do not specify the depth and detail of content and are used to validate or reject hypotheses, but the qualitative approach examines in depth the details of people's lives and examines hidden and intangible issues. This study also discusses the life skills of WAD and identifies their experiences.

### Study population

Targeted and voluntary sampling has been used to select participants in this study. The statistical population of this study consists of women applying for divorce in Tehran at least once in their life. The interviews were conducted at the Javadiyeh neighborhood hall in District 14 of Tehran. Twelve women who met the inclusion criteria for the study were selected for an oral interview. In this study, semi-structured interview questions were used.

At first, the interview questions were asked by two people as a pilot, and after the approval of the experts, the main questions were asked of the participants. After selecting the first sample and conducting the interview, the text of the interview was implemented and the basic concepts and analysis were created. Up to twelve interviews were conducted in the same way. In this study, the unit of analysis is the meaningful words.

## 4. Research findings

The general characteristics of the interviewees are as follows:

**Table 1:** General characteristics of participants

Code	Education	Profession	Age	No. of Childs	Interview Time (Min)
1	Pre-Diploma	Employed	28	1	40
2	Pre-Diploma	Housewife	49	2	25
3	Diploma	Housewife	52	3	40
4	Bachelor Degree	Employed	38	1	55
5	Elementary School	Housewife	42	2	52
6	Diploma	Employed	30	1	57
7	Diploma	Employed	39	3	57

8	Master Degree	Employed	35	1	45
9	Diploma	Housewife	36	3	52
10	Associate Degree	Housewife	33	0	45
11	Pre-Diploma	Employed	38	2	65
12	Associate Degree	Housewife	38	1	43

According to the above table data, 7 people have a diploma and sub-diploma and 5 people have a university degree, their average age is 38.16 years and these women had between 0 and 3 children. The average interview time was 48 minutes. In interviews with divorced women, the researcher sought the role of nine life skills in their lives. This is stated in the table below:

**Table 2:** Life skills of divorce applicants

Main Theme	Theme	No. of repetitions	Statements
Nine life skills	Problem Solving	12	Whenever I had a fight with my husband, I would leave the house and go to my father's house
	Expressing feelings and emotions	12	If he found out that I like a spoon, bothered me a lot; Because of this, I have become accustomed to not expressing my feelings and not saying that I like something.
	Resiliency	12	There is no emotion in our lives and I am just enduring life and I have no other choice.
	Effective Communication	12	The conversations we had ended in fights and fights, so we talked less and I never wanted to confabulate with him.
	Decision Making	12	I wish I had consulted with a few people at that time so that I could make a good decision and understand that if he didn't drink, he wouldn't go to drugs.
	Anger Management	8	My father taught me to defend myself when someone argued with me, and anyone who bothered me would beat him.
	Stress Management	7	Recently, when I fight with my husband, I feel bad and I feel very stressed
	Self-Awareness	6	I've been so stressed by life and I've been prevented from achieving what I love that I don't know who I am and what I want from life.
	Critical Thinking	6	I got angry several times and came to my father's house, but my brother did not allow me to get a divorce. Now that I look at my brother's picture, I tell him why you didn't let me get a divorce, my husband who didn't have a problem with it, and I was the only one who was very upset.

**Subcategories**

**Problem – solving**

For a long time, humans have been looking for solutions to complex problems in their lives. These problems range from normal daily issues to a variety of serious physical and mental diseases. The point here is that people have different coping styles to deal with their problems. In a way, everyone is trying to solve their problems in their way, and differently. Some of these people are not able to cope with their daily problems, and some have a wrong and dysfunctional coping style. Problem solving and creativity are at the highest level of human cognitive activity and are considered the most valuable educational and training goals (Salehi, Seif, Delavar&Karimi, 2004). Haga (1995) sees problem-solving as a practical coping skill that people use to deal with life's problems, and it's effective in a person's good compromise. This issue was also investigated in women, and all of them had doubts about the situation that needed to be resolved, and they did it the wrong way.

**Expressing feelings and emotions**

This ability enables one to recognize emotions in oneself and others, to know how emotions affect behavior, and to be able to respond appropriately to different emotions. Failure to deal with emotional states, such as sadness, anger, or anxiety, will increase physical and mental health and other negative consequences (Cleary Bradley, Friend &Gattman, 2011). All 12 women interviewed could not control their emotions and be unable to express even the smallest emotion in the right way.

**Resilience**

According to Zautra, Hall, and Murray (2010), the best definition of resilience is to see it as a successful adaptation to adverse conditions. Personality and situation traits may determine resilience processes, and these traits can lead to healthy outcomes after stressful situations. On the other hand, resilience is a dynamic process, that is, the reorganization of adaptive systems to create resilience in new environments, so resilience may vary at different stages of life and can be affected by the transition of individuals over time (Limeri-Chalfat, 2010). All 12 interviewees referred to life endurance, and the lack of this skill led people to follow this path without any successful adaptation.

**Effective communication**

If communication is done in the right way, people get closer to each other and share their thoughts and feelings. Effective communication closes the way to any possible misunderstandings and is the best way to build trust, gain information, and prevent interpersonal conflicts (Satir, 2018, 17). Communication may be verbal or nonverbal. All 12 people had difficulty communicating with their spouses, children, and even their original families. These women reported that in their conversations with their husbands, their first sentence did not continue in the second sentence, and they also complained about the lack of conversation at home.

**Decision making**

This ability helps a person to make decisions more effectively. If people can actively make decisions about their actions, examine different aspects of the choice, and evaluate the outcome of each choice, they will certainly be at higher levels of mental health. All 12 people said in

interviews that they were not able to make decisions in the critical stages of life or that they were often wrong in making decisions.

#### **Anger management**

Theoretically, anger is a fundamental but complex process, and it is often a response to not meeting one's own or others' expectations or to the behaviors of oneself and others who are considered unacceptable (Power & Tsia, 2007). Anger management does not seek to eliminate anger, but rather to encourage self-awareness, emotional and behavioral monitoring, which is one of the uses of the control method (Sadri Demirchi, Asadi & Ghazi, 2017). 8 women could not control their anger when it happened, and that upset them.

#### **Stress management**

Stress is an unpleasant physiological or psychological state that occurs in response to stressful stimuli. Since a particular incident can be considered stressful for one person and stress-free for another, therefore, most definitions of stress emphasize the relationship between the individual and the environment. Stress is the process of evaluation of an individual; that is, evaluating whether individual resources are sufficient to meet environmental expectations (Fata et al., 2006). Seven of the women interviewed admitted that they could not control their stress in the face of the events that took place in their lives, which also upset them.

#### **Self – awareness**

The ability to recognize our strengths and weaknesses, and wants, needs, desires, and realistic self-image, makes us better aware of our social rights, and responsibilities. By acquiring this skill, we answer the fundamental question "Who am I?" (Fata et al., 2006, 45). To have high self-esteem, people must first know what makes them feel good and then plan for such events to happen in their lives (World Health Organization, 1993, 189). Self-awareness is a factor that causes our thoughts to focus on our abilities and strengths. In general, gaining self-awareness skills is the source of constructive, useful, responsible, and self-respecting behaviors (Mirzaei, 2013). In six women, this skill was weak, and they didn't know who they were, they didn't know their strengths and weaknesses, and they were confused about living together.

#### **Critical Thinking**

Critical thinking is the ability to analyze information and experiences. Acquiring this skill teaches a person not to accept or reject anything easily and quickly, but of course, to question and argue about it, and then to accept or reject it. Those with critical thinking are not fooled by others and are not easily attracted to groups, individuals or drugs, because they are always thinking about the result by asking questions (Nazem Ghadi, Abu Bakar, and Njie, 2015). Six of these women did not have critical thinking skills and were influenced by their husbands' behaviors.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

This study aimed to evaluate the quality of life skills of WAD. The findings showed that all women who participated had difficulty with problem-solving skills, effective communication, expressing feelings and emotions,

resiliency, and also some of them had problems with decision-making, anger management, stress management, self-awareness, and critical thinking skills, respectively. The researches of Mazzuca et al (2018), Balkan & Kaya (2016), Beer (2016), Gaffel (2010) and Hulman (2006) showed that among people dissatisfied with life and divorce applicants, life skills play an important role in the development of marital problems, which are consistent with the results of the present study.

In explaining problem-solving skills and their role in dissatisfaction and divorce, it can be said that problem-solving skills are influential in all aspects of human behavior and are a common denominator of very different areas of human activities. Problem-solving is thinking that aims to solve a specific problem that involves both the formation of answers and the selection of possible answers (Solso, 1991, translation by Maher, 2009, 122) and on the other hand, Kohler believes that the process of achieving a real solution must involve the key concept of insight, that is, the cognitive restructuring that causes an indirect pathway to be perceived as leading to stress reduction (Sahebi, 2016, 13). Participating women have also resorted to the wrong and sometimes passive methods to minimize stress, to temporarily solve the problem, and have not found a permanent solution to the problems, and in the critical stages that need to be solved, they have shrugged off the issue or made it more complicated, and they acknowledged this in interviews.

Holman (2006), Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson & Bradbury (2010) and Egeci and Gencoz (2011) noted in their articles that dissatisfied individuals and applicants for divorce have poor problem-solving skills and that they need to be taught to improve their marital relationship.

Effective communication skills and the expression of feelings and emotions are among the communication skills. The purpose of effective communication skills is to communicate with others so that the message can be conveyed. If a person is unable to convey his or her views, ideas, and thoughts, a good relationship will not be established, and this will lead to the failure of the individual's goals. The inability to communicate effectively will lead to the formation of interpersonal conflicts, and ultimately, to the isolation and loneliness of individuals (Rahimi & Jazayeri, 2015, 13). On the other hand, ineffective communication is one in which one refrains from openly expressing its feelings or providing accurate information, and does not listen to the other party. Some of the barriers to effective communication include humiliation, blame, denial, labeling, expectation, helplessness, defensiveness, counterattack, backtrack, warning and threat, opposition, advice and counseling, judgment, prejudice, passive aggression and irony (Aghabakhshi, 2009). Women interviewed also mentioned these factors, and they complained about the lack of verbal and nonverbal communication that is important in effective communication and the expression of feelings and emotions. They have not learned how and when to communicate their emotions properly, and the lack of acceptance from their spouses has forced them to refrain from expressing their feelings and emotions.

In general, the world of human beings is the world of words and meanings. By weaving words together, human beings give meaning to their lives. Humans use words to express themselves and give meaning to their lives and relationships, and this is one of the main foundations of marital satisfaction (Hurst, 1996) that is lost in the marital life of these women.

In the researches of Mazzuca et al (2018), Gasbarriniet al (2015), Mehrani (2015), Tam et al (2011), Young & Long (2007) and Hartley et al (1991), it has been shown that effective communication and the expression of feelings and emotions are effective in enriching marital life, and there is a lack of it in men and WAD.

Resiliency is the ability of a person to adapt positively to life's events in response to successful situations (Southwick et al., 2014). Also, the concept of resiliency in dealing with the causes of severe and major stresses makes sense, and the result is an efficient adaptation to threatening conditions. Researches show that the same crises can lead to different consequences (Hawley & Dehaan, 1996). In other words, a crisis has the potential to create two completely different situations: threats and opportunities. Therefore, anyone with a higher level of adjustment will be able to overcome it. Women seeking divorce did not view difficult situations as an opportunity, but they declared that they had to endure life, and this thinking prevented them from analyzing the situation and taking the right path, and by enduring life, they stopped trying the rest of the paths ahead. Valizadeh, Salehi & Shakernia (2015) has reached this conclusion in their research that there is a significant difference between the resiliency of WAD and ordinary women, and Zeng, Huang & Fu (2020) and Aboalshamat, Alsiyud, Al-Sayed, Alreddadi, Faqiehi & Almehmadi (2018) and Tagay, Karatas, Bayar & Savi-Caker (2016) showed that there is a significant relationship between resiliency and marital satisfaction, and in general, it can be said that the lower the resiliency, the lower the marital satisfaction.

Decision-making skills help a person make decisions about life issues more efficiently, and if people can make decisions about their actions, examine different aspects of the choice, and evaluate the consequences, they will certainly be at higher levels of mental health (GhiasFakhri and Binazadeh, 2008). In general, there are three methods of decision making: immediate, emotional, and logical decision-making. Women seeking divorce were more likely to use immediate and emotional decision-making, and on the other hand, the researchers examined people's assessments of profits and losses, and the results indicated that people choose the outcome that has the most expected value (Somohano, 2013). However, this was not the case with the women in the study, and they could not assess the profits and losses of their decision, and they did not have this skill, which was even evident in dealing with the child and the spouse, which could be due to the lack of proper education in this area.

Critical thinking is the ability to analyze information and experiences, and teaching this skill enables individuals to resist the values and pressures of the mass media and to avoid the harms that result from it (Anderson, How &

Sodden, 2004). Critical thinking is the thoughtful and constructive process of thinking and evaluating evidence. Critical evaluation of the information is very necessary for all aspects of daily life (Naseri, 2009) and gives a person the power to distinguish healthy suggestions from unhealthy suggestions among the many information and suggestions given to him to find the reality, and not to limit himself to guess (Anderson et al., 2004). In six women, this thinking was weak, and they could not resist the suggestions of others, including their spouses and friends, to choose the best offer for themselves. But these women, with the slightest suggestion, moved from one branch to another, and this skill itself requires thinking about the problems.

To explain this, it can be said that these women want to get results in the shortest possible time, so they do not examine all aspects and want to solve problems without thinking, so they agree with the first suggestion from the outside and act accordingly; this behavior will reduce stress, but in the long run, it will cause dissatisfaction, because the problem is not fundamentally solved but only remained silent. In his research, Taghdisi (2015) concluded that teaching critical thinking skills in married women helps reduce behavioral problems, which can be a confirmation of the results obtained in this study. Celik, Saricam, Sakiz & Ilbay (2015) showed in their research that there is a significant relationship between life satisfaction and critical thinking.

Self-awareness skills are the ability to recognize oneself and be aware of the characteristics of strengths and weaknesses, wants, desires, fears, needs and disgusts, and the development of self-awareness helps a person to find out if he is under psychological pressure (GhiasFakhri & Binazadeh, 2008). To explain this, it can be said that because a person is not aware of his needs, he cannot meet his needs in healthy ways, and on the other hand, he cannot set a goal for his life and does not carry out a healthy process of identification. Most of these women have not gone through the process of identifying in childhood and adolescence, and therefore, in adulthood, they have not been able to acquire and develop self-awareness skills. Hajipour, Hosseini, Matbouei, Khafri, Vasli & Esmaili (2017) and Mashalpour, Kavooosi, Ebadi & Mousavi (2016) have mentioned in their research the effect of self-awareness skills on marital satisfaction and concluded that as self-awareness increases, marital satisfaction can increase.

The skill of coping with stress is one form of recognizing the various stresses of life and its impact on the individual. Identifying the sources of stress and how they affect humans, enables a person to reduce pressure and stress by taking their actions and positions (Poortaghi Yousefdeh, Poor Agharoodbordeh & Sotoudeh Navardi, 2013). Explaining this issue can be in this way that these women have low self-esteem due to unhealthy marital life. The pressures of everyday issues are less for people with high self-esteem and good supportive roots. Having high self-esteem helps a person cope with the negative effects, tensions, and daily stresses. The fact that everyday issues have a reciprocal effect on stress response has important implications for successful stress management. But these women do not react well to stress due to low self-esteem and poor support, and thus they face problems. The results of a

study by Merz et al. (2014) showed that there is a significant relationship between external and internal stress and marital satisfaction, and women who were more skilled in coping with stress have higher marital satisfaction, which also has a positive effect on their spouse's satisfaction with the marriage. And the study by Lavner Carney & Bradbury (2016) also states that when daily stress is high, couples perceive and evaluate life events more negatively. The women interviewed also noted that their stress was passed on to their husbands, which exacerbated the problems and prevented them to think and act correctly.

Two things can be said about anger: 1. the main cause of anger is threats, failures, and obstacles that people face. 2. The goal of anger is often defense, war, and destruction. Although anger is a natural emotion, there are also some risks. When anger is out of control and destructive, it can lead to problems at work, interpersonal relationships, and quality of life. Research has also shown that women have used violence to defend themselves against their husbands' anger and threats, which in some cases have led to conflict, and sometimes to verbal violence (swearing and insults). They have not learned how to react to the anger and defensive behavior of others and control their anger and to be able to talk about what they want and to find a good solution to their goals.

A practical proposition that researchers would better address in the future is to compare the life skills of men and WAD and those who are satisfied with their marriage, which can enrich the results of this study.

According to the present study, it can be concluded that WAD have problems at the individual level. These problems have led to exposure to the disappearance of their marital life. One of their problems is a lack of life skills. Effective communication, expression of feelings and emotions, problem-solving, and resiliency are some of the most influential skills that people attempting to divorce have significantly weakened. Ignoring this issue can impose huge and irreparable costs on families and society. However, with timely training in life skills, the risk of family breakdown can be reduced. It seems that if these women become proficient in life skills, they are more likely to preserving marital life, learn from past mistakes, and start a better life. Finally, life skills are essential for everyone, so if they start in childhood, people are prepared to live in adulthood and can have fewer problems in married life.

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