

# Effectiveness of a Psycho-Educational Group Intervention Program for Improving Post-Divorce Adjustment Difficulties of Women

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## Abstract

**Background:** Divorce can be a deterrent factor in the personal growth and development of divorced women and children. Consequently, an intervention program is appropriate to improve problems related to post-divorce adjustment. A lot of intervention models were developed to assist women effectively deal with post-divorce adjustment difficulties. Psycho-Educational Group Intervention Program, also called 'Rebuilding after Divorce Seminar', is one such intervention that proved to be effective particularly in the Western nations. However, there are no evidences if this model would apply to divorcees in different cultures like the one in Ethiopia. Given that the causes and impacts of divorce are culturally mediated, there is then a critical need to examine the effectiveness of this model in aiding divorced women cope with adjustment difficulties accruing divorce. This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of psycho-educational group intervention program for improving post-divorce adjustment of women.

**Methods:** A 'pretest-posttest control group design' was employed in such a way that a sample of 12 divorced women were randomly divided into experimental (n=6) and control (n=6) groups and then Fisher's Divorce Adjustment Scale was administered to them as a pre-test and post-test measure. The intervention seminar (themes focused on managing symptoms of grief, guilt reaction, separation anger, self-worth, relatedness, love, and sexuality) was offered in five sessions for five weeks, two hours each, to the treatment group to boost skills that help dealing with the post-divorce effect; while the control group didn't receive any treatment. Intervention gains were gauged through ANCOVA.

**Results:** Findings indicated that there were significant changes in the divorce adjustment process among the treatment group after the intervention suggesting that this intervention model was effective in rebuilding divorced women's coping mechanisms and, therefore, can be used for similar purposes in the Ethiopian setting.

**Conclusion:** The divorce recovery manual, in conjunction with the five-week seminar, is beneficial to those experiencing the trauma of divorce. It helps them to grow emotionally, physically, spiritually, and socially in the divorce adjustment process.

**Keywords:** Post-Divorce Adjustment • Fisher's Divorce Adjustment Scale • Divorced Women • Marriage • Divorce

## Introduction

Research indicates that of all changes through the life course, divorce appears to require the highest personal and social changes to adjust to subsequent demands of life. Studies have consistently shown that women and children who experience divorce are at an increased risk for a wide range of mental health, substance use, and social adjustment problems. Specifically, women compared to men, face additional changes and challenges after divorce. Moreover,

women would suffer from personal, social, cultural, economic, emotional, and parental problems after divorce and it affects them more than men [1]. Generally, literature in the area reported divorce has an enormous psychosocial effect on many aspects of divorced women, including lack of social support, income decline, depression, a feeling of rootlessness and lack of identity, feel abandoned and rejected, difficulties in new friendships, anger and anxiety, and lower levels of social involvement and less contact with friends.

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The impacts of divorce could even be worse in societies where the dominant cultural norms emphasize marriages as a sacred institution that is highly valued for preserving and strengthening family and social ties. Above and beyond personal impacts, divorce is also a social separation of communities that were united through marriage. Women being homemakers and housewives, the economic impacts of divorce on women in developing countries are tremendous. This being the case, the incidence of divorce is yet growing. According to Tilson and Larsen [2] in Ethiopia, 45% of all first marriages end in divorce or separation within 30 years, and 95% of the women marry by the age of 30, and 45% of all first marriages end in divorce within the first year, 34% within 10 years, and 40% within 20 years. In addition, the same study stated that two-third of the women divorce within the first five years of marriage. When considering the needs of this growing post-divorce population, the question arises as to what specific strategies are most effective in assisting this population to adjust to life after divorce.

A number of intervention programs were examined to determine the contributions for managing adjustment difficulties to separation and divorce. Some of these include the Beginning Experience ; the Treatment Seminars ; Communication Skills Training; Building Skills in Divorce Adjustment Groups; and the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Seminars . Most studies support a group intervention approach to helping divorced women adjust to their post-divorce lives.

Accordingly, some researchers attempted to explore the contributions of group-oriented interventions. For example, Addington examined the value of an eight-week psycho-educational and support group program in six separate groups and found that this intervention was effective. Similarly, Faramarz and colleagues also examined the Effectiveness of Fisher's Rebuilding Group Intervention on Divorce Adjustment and General Health of Iranian Divorced Women with results suggesting that this intervention is useful in many ways. There is then a need to examine the effectiveness of this model in improving Post-Divorce Adjustment difficulties of women in Ethiopia. This is mainly because while many studies have examined the cause and consequence of divorce in the Ethiopian context, virtually no research has exclusively focused on examining an intervention approach, specially designed for divorced women. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the Rebuilding After Divorce Seminar Intervention Program developed by to improve the post-divorce adjustment of women. For this study, a five-week intervention program designed to help divorced women cope with numerous emotional, psychological, and physical aspects of divorce [3].

## Methods

### The Intervention

The intervention program (also called the Rebuilding after Divorce Seminar) to improve women's post-divorce adjustment. It is a seminar designed to help divorcees cope with numerous emotional, psychological, and physical effects of divorce. According to the Facilitator's Manual, the intervention program consists of ten sessions stretched over 10-weeks with 2-hour duration in each session. These sessions are designed to help participants fulfill their desire to grow while being informed about the various aspects of life

after divorce and how to cope with various consequences. The 10 sessions include different aspects of life in which behavioral objectives, sets of agendas, homework, and some specific topics were raised for discussions focusing on introduction (Session 1 ), grief (Session 2), guilt & rejection (Session 3), separation anger(Session 4), self-worth (Session 5), transition (Session 6), openness (Session 7), love (Session 8), relatedness (Session 9), and sexuality (Session 10). Readers are advised to refer to the intervention manual for specific etiquettes and protocols. The present intervention was made strictly observing these protocols to help the sampled divorcees cope with different psychological, emotional, and physical aspects of divorce and separation [4].

### Design and participants

Pretest-posttest control group design was used in the present study with a quantitative approach of data collection and analysis. Sample divorcees were taken from among those who visited the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) in Addis Ababa, a non-profit Ethiopian Charity established by Ethiopian women lawyers in 1996, for free legal services in handling their divorce cases. At the time sampling was made, a total of 50 divorced women were taking different services relating to their cases. Only 12 divorced women were sampled through a non-probability sampling of those who were easy to reach. The participants were divided randomly into experimental (n=6) and control (n=6) groups. believes that an experimental group of seven members is an ideal size, but the size can differ between five. The inclusion criteria were being divorced from a permanent marriage, not being under other therapeutic interventions before or during the program, and willingness to participate in the group intervention sessions. On the other hand, the exclusion criteria were divorced women who were in a relationship, women who were out of the city, or those who could not attend all sessions of the seminar were excluded from the study. To observe the ethical considerations, the objectives of this intervention program were explained to the participants, and written informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to the study. In addition, before registering for the program, the participants were informed about the procedure of this intervention program. They were also assured of the confidentiality of all information that they shared pretest and posttest and during the intervention program. Moreover, participates of the study were allowed to withdraw from the intervention at any time; which in fact, didnâ€™t happen through the intervention course.

### Pre-Test and Post-Test Measure

Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale (FDAS) was used both as a pre- and post-intervention measure. FDAS was designed by Bruce Fisher for use both in therapeutic interventions as well as research and then subsequently used as a diagnostic tool in "The Rebuilding Seminar" (recovery seminar) to assist in screening persons having difficulties in adapting to the post-divorced situation. It consists of 100 items (to identify strengths and weaknesses of post-divorced adaptation of divorcees) that are grouped into six subscales: disentanglement from the love relationship (22 items), feeling of self-anger (12 items), symptoms of grief (24 items), feeling of self-worth (25 items), social self-worth (9 items), and rebuilding social trust (8 items). The total score of the adjustment to divorce is mentioned under the subscale adjustment to the ending of a love relationship. The items are to be rated on a 5-point Likert scale (almost always (1),

usually (2), sometimes (3), rarely (4), almost never (5). This instrument has been utilized in various studies and administered to a range of populations in different countries confirming the appropriateness of the total as well as the subscales for measuring post-divorce adjustment situation in heterogeneous cultures. The tool was translated to Amharic language (the most convenient language for the participants) and this Amharic version was administered to collect data before and after the seminar. Reliability test was also run from the data collected for this study and the finding appeared to be consistent (high internal consistency) with the above studies for the overall FDAS and subscales: overall FDAS  $\alpha = 0.83$ , disentanglement  $\alpha = 0.81$ , anger  $\alpha = 0.86$ , grief  $\alpha = 0.84$ , self-worth  $\alpha = 0.87$ , social self-worth  $\alpha = 0.85$  and social trust  $\alpha = 0.76$ .

## Procedures

Firstly, an initial interview took place to gather essential background information and to understand the post-divorce life situations of the participants. Then, the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale was administered to measure the overall adjustment of the participants in the divorce process. Preliminary analysis suggested that the divorced women were facing different problems after divorce including intense emotions (e.g., grief, anger, guilt, stress, depression), identity threat (e.g., social rejection, misjudgment by others), vague future (e.g., concerns about children's future, little chance of having an appropriate remarriage, fear of loneliness), difficulties of transitioning, problems of relatedness and self-disclosure and spousal absence causing additional concerns over children's need for their father, a supporter and protector. Even most of them reported of facing difficulties in relationships with their children. With regard to the onset of the problem, eight of them state that it is started immediately after the divorce. The remaining four states that the problem occurred after a long period of time. In relation to the duration of the problem, the responses are varied, some of them said it last for 2 up to 4 years and others said it consistently occur after they divorced.

A proper intervention model needs to target all of these concerns have shown that FDAS addresses the emotional pain experienced by the divorced individuals following the divorce and, therefore, the present researchers were decided to use this model of intervention strictly observing the facilitator's manual. Accordingly, after the participants were welcomed, the researchers explained the proceedings of the intervention program. The participants assigned to the control group were told that the present group was full, but that a new group would be starting immediately upon the completion of the first group in five weeks and are now excused. They were contacted by the group leaders once a week over the five-week waiting period. Although this contact was limited to reminding them that the next group would begin soon and to ask how they were doing, they were invited to contact the leaders in an event they feel the need for a post-divorce adjustment program [5].

## Results

### Family Information

Age range of the participants was from 24 to 40 years; their educational level varied from elementary to higher education, and the duration of their marriage was from 5 years to 10 years; also, the time period passed since their legal divorce was from 4 to 8 years. Nine participants were government employed and three of them were self-employed. Twelve of them had children. Eight of them were living in a separate house after the divorce, while four were living at their parents' house. Regarding their children's grade level, it varied from pre-primary to secondary education. All of them are referred by the EWLA to the intervention program. There emotional, social, and psychological adjustment difficulties are a reason for the referral. Table 1 provides a brief description of background issues of each divorced women

### Descriptive Statistics of the Two Groups

THIS presents the descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation of the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale along with its subclass, in both the pre-test and post-test stages of the experimental and control groups.

The indicated the descriptive statistics of divorced women score on FDAS for both subscales and total. There is a significant mean difference in the experimental groups between the pre-test and post-test scores. However, there is no significant mean difference in the control groups between the pre-test and post-test scores. Therefore, post-test scores (mean and standard deviation) of the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale and subscales showed significant growth of the experimental group participants in the divorce adjustment process. Participant growth is attributed to their participation in the structured five-week seminar, manual, learning about the divorce process, and interaction with other members of the group.

### Comparing the two groups on the Pre-Test Result

An analysis of variance was used to determine the difference between the groups. Table 3 shows the pre-test result of the treatment and control groups on the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale. The result indicates that no significant differences were found between the two groups on the pre-test measures,  $F(1, 11) = 2.37$ ,  $p = .15$ .

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	456.33	1	456.33	2.37	0.15
Intercept	476008.3	1	476008.3	2480.07	0
Group	456.33	1	456.33	2.37	0.15
Error	1919.33	10	191.93	-	-
Total	478384	12	-	-	-
Corrected Total	2375.66	11	-	-	-

**Table 1.** The Pre-test result of the treatment and control groups on the FDAS.

### **Comparing the Two groups with Pre-Test scores as the covariate on the Post-Test scores**

Post-test scores showed significant differences between the treatment group and the control group,  $F(1, 11) = 395.55, p=0.00$ . That is using a group Rebuilding Divorce Seminar format for the participants seemed to be an effective treatment for this population to improve the post-divorce adjustment problems.

## **Discussion**

This intervention study was conducted on twelve divorced women to assist the divorced women in dealing with the psychological, emotional, and cognitive effects pertaining to divorce. One method that will determine the divorced women's overall adjustment to the post-divorce process is to examine the total score/mean on the FDAS. The total score is the cumulative score of the six sub-scales and, according to Bruce Fisher, is much more statistically important than any one of the individual sub-scales. The emphasis of the evaluation of one overall adjustment to post-divorce should be based upon the total score/mean. In the present intervention study, the experimental group participants showed a higher mean score ( $M=401.83, SD=22.42$ ) in the post-test than the pre-test ( $M=205.33, SD=13.26$ ). However, the control group participants didn't show any significant difference in their mean score in the pretest and posttest (See Table 2). A comparison of pre-test and post-test intervention scores for the experimental group participants showed a significant increase in the total divorce adjustment process. One reason for the change in post-divorce adjustment among experimental group participants is that the group environment was conducive to sharing and supporting each other. Second, the thrust of each session was solution-oriented, which led to accepting responsibility and finding solutions to problems. Third, to accomplish these tasks, the seminar, along with assignments, enabled the participants to mobilize their inner strengths.

Let us see changes in relation to each subscale of FDAS, self-worth, Table 2 shows that there was a positive change among experimental group participants in their level of self-worth after the seminar. One reason for this perceptual change is that the participants hear positive and supportive messages from the group members rather than derogatory comments. Another factor contributing to increased self-worth is the sharing of appreciation among the participants throughout the sessions. A major contributor to raising self-worth is that as individuals began to accept responsibility for their survival and future, they began to feel more in control and less helpless in their situations. This renewed confidence in their own strengths and abilities led to greatly improved feelings of self-worth. In relation to their level of disentanglement, there was a positive change observed among the experimental group participants. Prior to the intervention program, the divorced women frequently looked to the former spouse for some kind of support or help through various situations. The intervention program helped them recognize other support systems other than the former spouse. Another factor leading to disentanglement was that divorced women began to invest in their own goals instead of their former relationships. The mean score strongly suggests that divorced women did indeed experience a positive change in their anger level after the seminar. During the seminar, the divorced women learned

that anger during the divorce process is normal and how to distinguish between functional and irrational anger. Simply admitting their anger helped them to handle it better. They also learned to understand the feelings and viewpoints of the former spouse, which seemed to decrease the need to "lash out" at him/her, thus lessening their anger levels. As the participants began to feel better about themselves, they were better able to handle anger.

Similarly, the Divorce Recovery Seminar showed a change in their grief level among the experimental group participants. The seminar helped the divorced women in their grieving process by helping them to identify the losses they suffered as a result of the divorce. When they identified each loss, they could then work on beginning to compensate for the loss. Another important point in their grief growth was their support for each other as they grieved their losses. Perhaps the most significant factor in their increase in the grief score was the sense of hope that each participant gained. They realized that they would survive their divorce and find successful solutions to the problems caused by divorce. As the participants began to accept responsibility for finding their own solutions, and thus began to take charge of their own lives, they were better able to accept their losses, which is the last part of the grief process. Also, there was a positive change in divorced women's openness to social intimacy after the seminar. The factor which led to this growth was primarily the group itself. The participants had learned to express their feelings to each other for five weeks and had found acceptance in the group. This led to improved self-concept and an improvement in their trust of themselves and others. Divorced women who attend the Divorce Recovery Seminar show a positive change in their social self-worth. This increase exhibits their growth by their willingness to extend themselves within their friendship circles. There were two reasons for this growth. First, session four was effective in helping them learn the dynamics of making new friends. Second, they had experienced making friends with each other in a non-threatening environment during the five weekly sessions. They now had the confidence to reach out to others and in return accept those who reached out to them.

In this section, the results of the study are discussed in relation to previous research findings. According to the results, this type of group intervention could significantly improve the post-divorce adjustment of women after divorce ( $P<0.05$ ). This means that rebuilding after divorce seminar group intervention improves the lives of divorced women after divorce, which is in line with the obtained results of the studies conducted by different researcher. On the other hand, Gertina (2005) demonstrated that a group intervention could not significantly reduce the anxiety and depression of divorced women, which was inconsistent with our findings.

## **Conflict of Interest**

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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