ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Journal of Emergency Health Care. 2026;15(1): 16
https://doi.org/10.22034/jehc.15.1.16

The Effect of Systemic Family Therapy on Reducing Triangulation and Improving Family Boundaries in Families Involved in Emotional Divorce Among Patients Referring to Mental Health Centers

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Article history:

Received: 28 Mar 2026
Accepted: 21 Jun 2026
Available online: 29 Jun 2026

Keywords:

Systemic family therapy
Family boundary setting
Triangulation
Emotional divorce
Mental health centers

Abstract

Purpose: The present study aims to investigate the effect of systemic family therapy on reducing triangulation and improving family boundaries in families involved in emotional divorce among patients referred to mental health centers.
Method: The present study is a semi-experimental pre-test-post-test design with a control group. The statistical population includes families involved in emotional divorce among patients referred to mental health centers in Tehran, of which 30 people were selected through convenience sampling and randomly assigned to two groups (15 people in the experimental group and 15 people in the control group). To collect data, Bahrami and Yousefi's (2017) triangulation questionnaire and the researcher-made "Family Communication Boundaries" questionnaire based on Minuchin's structural family therapy theory were used. Systemic family therapy was implemented by the researcher for the experimental group in 8 sessions for 4 weeks, two 60-minute sessions each week. During this period, the control group did not receive any intervention. The results of the experiments were calculated using SPSS software.
Findings: The results of the study show that systemic family therapy has an effect on the level of family boundary setting and significantly improves it. Also, systemic family therapy has an effect on the level of triangulation in families involved in emotional divorce in the study and significantly reduces it.
Conclusion: The results indicate the ability of this therapeutic method to create fundamental and lasting changes in the structure and interactions of families with deep emotional problems.

Cite this article as: Khoshabi M, Sedighi F. The Effect of Systemic Family Therapy on Reducing Triangulation and Improving Family Boundaries in Families Involved in Emotional Divorce Among Patients Referring to Mental Health Centers. J Emerg Health Care. 2026;15(1):16. https://doi.org/10.22034/jehc.15.1.16.

Introduction

The family, as the most fundamental social institution, plays a very important and influential role in the mental and emotional health of individuals. The structure, functioning, and internal interactions of the family can be the basis for mental health or Psychological injuries (1). One of the most important challenges observed in many families today is emotional divorce; a situation in which, despite the formal continuation of cohabitation, a deep emotional distance has been created between the couple and effective communication, affection, and emotional support have decreased (2). In addition to directly affecting couples, this situation can also disrupt mental health and family structure, and have negative effects on children and other family members. In such families, boundary and

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role problems, as well as destructive triangulation, are among the issues that threaten family mental health and require specialized and targeted interventions (3). Therefore, in-depth understanding of these concepts and finding effective treatment solutions are important priorities in the field of family mental health.

One of the key concepts in understanding these problems is family boundaries. Boundaries are the imaginary or real lines that separate family members from each other while organizing the relationships between them. Healthy boundaries create an atmosphere of mutual respect, independence, and yet appropriate communication, so that members can grow individually while still belonging to the family (4). Boundary problems, such as unclear, intrusive, or restrictive boundaries, can lead to conflict, reduced healthy communication, and weakened roles and responsibilities. In families where emotional divorce has occurred, family boundaries are often disrupted and need to be adjusted and improved in order to restore the family's mental health (5). The importance of paying attention to healthy boundaries in preventing psychological trauma and improving overall family functioning has been emphasized by many family systems theorists. Another central concept of this research is triangulation, which has its roots in family systems theory. Triangulation occurs when two family members who are experiencing tension or conflict bring a third person or people into their relationship to relieve stress and pressure. This pattern often further complicates relationships, escalates conflicts, and creates crisis in the family (6). Triangulation can play roles such as mediator, refuge, or conflict agent in family relationships, all of which somehow disrupt the balance of the system. In families facing emotional divorce, triangulation can be used as an unhealthy coping mechanism, exacerbating problems rather than resolving them (7). A careful examination of the role of triangulation in the creation and perpetuation of family conflicts can help design targeted therapeutic interventions.

In order to address such complex and multidimensional problems in families, systemic therapeutic interventions, especially systemic family therapy, have been recognized as a comprehensive and effective approach. Systemic family therapy believes that the family should be viewed as a coherent whole and that changes in any component of the family can affect the entire system (8). By focusing on interactions, structure, boundaries, and communication patterns within the family, this approach attempts to identify and correct problems such as inappropriate boundary setting and triangulation. By making changes in the way family members communicate and improving interaction skills, systemic therapists provide the basis for reducing tensions and rebuilding emotional relationships (9). In this way, systemic family therapy not only addresses individual behavior modification but also provides the basis for sustainable and long-term change by transforming the entire family structure (10).

In families involved in emotional divorce, the importance of using systemic approaches is doubled, as the problems have penetrated not only at the individual level but also throughout the entire family system (11). Family therapy in these cases not only helps improve the couple's situation, but also ensures the mental health of all members, including children, with the aim of improving boundaries and eliminating or reducing destructive triangulation. In fact, this type of intervention can serve as a bridge to rebuild emotional connections and increase family solidarity, preventing the complete collapse of the family system. Such an approach can also prevent the occurrence of long-term negative consequences such as anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems in children (12). Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the effect of systemic family therapy on reducing triangulation and improving family boundaries in families involved in emotional divorce.

In their research, Sabzevari and Khoynejad (2022) examined the effectiveness of Minuchin's structural family therapy approach on improving communication patterns and marital conflicts in women experiencing emotional divorce. The results indicated that Minuchin's structural family therapy approach led to a significant difference in the mean post-test scores of the experimental group in both marital conflict and communication patterns variables. Minuchin's structural family therapy approach can be beneficial in reducing marital conflicts and improving the communication pattern of women experiencing emotional divorce, and subsequently, reducing emotional divorce and increasing marital adjustment (13).

Babasafari et al. (2021) conducted a study comparing the effectiveness of combining the structural system method with the solution-oriented method on marital conflicts, boundaries, and triangulation of couples. The results showed that the combination of the structural system method and the solution-oriented method are effective in improving marital conflicts, triangulation, and rigid boundaries, flexible boundaries, and loose boundaries. The results of the Tukey test showed that the combined method was more effective than the systemic method on the dependent variables, and this effect was reported in the stable follow-up phase. According to the present results, it can be said that the combined method was used to improve marital conflicts, triangulation, and boundary dimensions; although both methods showed their effectiveness (14).

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Ahmadimehr et al. (2020) presented a study titled "Investigating the Effectiveness of Bowen's Intergenerational Method on Family Relations, Boundaries, Triangulation, and Control Methods of Married Women in Isfahan." The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (multivariate analysis of covariance). The results showed that this method was effective in improving the variables studied: family relationship dimensions except for the relationship with one's own family, flexible boundaries, chaotic boundaries, and emotion-focused and solution-focused control styles except for dry boundaries and ambiguous boundaries. According to these results, the Bowen method is an effective method for improving some aspects of family relationships, boundaries, and methods of controlling systemic variables among married women in Isfahan (15).

Salerno et al. (2023) presented a study titled "Parental Triangulation in Separated and Divorced Families: Causes and Impact on Parent-Child Intergenerational Conflict." This article, with specific reference to marital conflict and divorced couples, describes the main causes of the triangulation process and its impact on children (and adolescents) as the third important participant in parental conflict. Furthermore, it focuses on the long-term consequences associated with the triangulation process to exposure to parental conflict, which can negatively impact children's well-being throughout the life cycle and even into adulthood. A qualitative analysis was conducted on the selected studies, focusing on the following: (1) the different types of triangulation commonly used in intergenerational family relationships; (2) an up-to-date summary of research on the impact of triangulation on child well-being and parent-child conflict; and (3) key features of successful preventive and psychotherapeutic interventions. In conclusion, the results, by examining the long-term effects of the triangulation process, highlight the developmental trajectories of children who are most at risk and vulnerable, and focus on the importance of preventing the intergenerational transmission of marital conflict as a way to reduce mental health costs and improve the well-being of children and families who are all caught up in these conflicting and destructive dynamics (16).

Safoorae-Parizi et al. (2023) conducted a study with the aim of investigating the relationship between family boundaries and emotional divorce with the mediating role of marital satisfaction. The subjects responded to three scales: Islamic family boundaries, marital satisfaction, and emotional divorce. Data analysis was performed using the four-step Baron and Kenny method using linear regression. The findings showed: a) There is a negative relationship between family boundaries and emotional divorce; b) There is a positive relationship between family boundaries and marital satisfaction; c) There is a negative relationship between marital satisfaction and emotional divorce; and d) Marital satisfaction plays a mediating role in the relationship between family boundaries and emotional divorce. Therefore, organizing and smoothing family boundaries, focusing on increasing marital satisfaction, reduces emotional divorce. The ultimate result of this organization and efficiency will be the strengthening of the foundations of the family (5).

The Method of Research

The method of the present study is a semi-experimental pre-test-post-test design with a control group. The statistical population of this study includes families involved in emotional divorce among patients referred to mental health centers in Tehran. Of these, 30 people were selected using a convenience method (non-generalizable) and based on demographic variables such as age, and randomly assigned to two groups (15 in the experimental group and 15 in the control group). The following questionnaires were used to collect information:

Triangulation Questionnaire: This questionnaire was developed and structured by Bahrami and Yousefi (2017). The scoring method is scored on a five-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree and assesses the desire to deal with communication problems by involving a third party and consists of 16 items that are based on Minuchin's (1974) structural theory. This scale has a total score. Its face validity was confirmed by an expert and its reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and was found to be 0.87, which was acceptable (17).

The Communication Boundaries Scale was designed by the researcher to measure three types of communication boundaries in the family, including intertwined boundaries, normal boundaries, and discrete boundaries. This questionnaire consists of thirty questions, each of which is specifically designed to assess one of these three types of boundaries; ten questions are dedicated to intertwined boundaries, ten questions to normal boundaries, and ten questions to discrete boundaries. This questionnaire consists of thirty questions, each specifically designed to assess one of these three types of boundaries; ten questions are dedicated to intertwined boundaries, ten questions to normal boundaries, and ten questions to discrete boundaries. In this study, normal boundaries were examined. To ensure the quality and effectiveness of the questions, their content validity was first assessed in a preliminary stage by a group of professors specializing

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in the field of family communication boundaries. They were asked to evaluate each question based on three criteria: clarity of concept, relevance to communication boundaries, and the extent to which these boundaries were measured. Also, in the formal narrative section, an effort was made to arrange the questions in such a way that their language and structure would be attractive to the respondents. For this purpose, the level of understanding and comprehension of the subjects was taken into account, and the words and content of the questions were selected based on the interests of the audience. In the content validity process, the opinions of several experts in the field of family counseling were used to eliminate questions that were inconsistent with the intended content or were far from the main topic. After confirming these validity steps, the questionnaire was administered to a pilot sample of forty people to measure its reliability. The results showed that the reliability coefficient of the entire scale was 0.78, 0.72 for the external family boundaries scale, and 0.76 for the internal family boundaries scale. Accordingly, after these steps, the questionnaire was ready to be used in the final implementation of the research.

Systemic family therapy sessions were conducted by the researcher for the experimental group over a period of 8 sessions over a period of 4 weeks, with two 60-minute sessions per week. During this period, the control group did not receive any intervention. After the sessions, the questionnaire questions were read to the subjects again as a post-test, the raw scores were calculated and recorded, and finally, the results of the tests were calculated using SPSS software.

The Results of Research

Levine's test was used to check the assumption of normal distribution of variables.

Table 1. Assumption of normal distribution of variables

Group	Number	Mean±standard deviation	Levin	
		Age	Triangulation	Family boundaries settings
Test	15	1 . 414±32 . 65	0 . 163	0 . 296
Control	15	1 . 414±32 . 65		

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of variables before systemic family therapy in the experimental and control groups

Variables	Mean (standard deviation) Experimental group	Mean (standard deviation) Control group
Triangulation	(2 . 20) 74 . 71	(2 . 80) 76 . 25
Family Boundary settings	(1 . 79) 24 . 32	(2 . 12) 26 . 52

Table 3. Mean and standard deviation of variables after systemic family therapy in the two experimental and control groups

Variables	Mean (standard deviation) Experimental group	Mean (standard deviation) Control group
Triangulation	(2 . 62) 69 . 85	(4 . 10) 75 . 82
Family Boundary settings	(1 . 26) 25 . 72	(2 . 12) 19 . 38

The results show that in the two experimental and control groups, the condition of equality of variance is acceptable from the perspective of the research variables. Based on the descriptive findings, the dispersion indices and central tendency of the research variables are shown in Tables 2 and 3, separated by group and type of test.

The results show that the average scores of family triangulation and boundary setting in the control and experimental groups are almost equal, and the results show that the experimental and control groups do not differ significantly from each other.

The findings in the table show that the mean scores of the variables in the experimental group are lower than those in the control group. In other words, systemic family therapy has reduced the mean scores in the variables of triangulation and family boundary enhancement, while no significant difference has been observed in the control group.

The results of testing the first hypothesis that "systemic family therapy has an effect on the level of family boundary enhancement" are presented as follows:

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Table 4. Results of univariate analysis of covariance on pre-test-post-test scores of family boundary setting.

Source of changes	Sum of squares	Degree of freedom	Mean squares	F	Significance level
Pretest	19 . 11	1	19 . 11	7 . 11	0 . 05
Group	100 . 38	1	100 . 38	32 . 67	0 . 001
Error	95 . 85	27	2 . 93		
Total	20807 . 9	30			

Based on the results obtained, after adjusting for pre-test scores, there is a significant effect on the between-group factor (F=32.67, P=0.001). The scores show that the average of the experimental group that was exposed to counseling increased significantly. Therefore, it can be concluded that systemic family therapy has an effect on the level of family boundary setting and significantly increases it. Therefore, the first hypothesis of the study is confirmed.

The results of testing the second hypothesis that "systemic family therapy has an effect on triangulation in families involved in emotional divorce" are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Results of univariate analysis of covariance on pre-test-post-test scores of the triangulation variable

Source of changes	Sum of squares	Degree of freedom	Mean squares	F	Significance level
Pretest	6 . 78	1	6 . 78	0 . 53	0 . 34
Group	126 . 58	1	126 . 58	14 . 43	0 . 001
Error	311 . 88	27	10 . 61		
Total	136417 . 33	30			

The results show that after adjusting for pre-test scores, there is a significant effect of the between-group factor (F=14.43, P=0.001). The scores show that the mean of the experimental group that was exposed to the treatment decreased significantly. Therefore, it can be concluded that systemic family therapy has an effect on triangulation in families involved in emotional divorce and significantly reduces it. Therefore, the second hypothesis of the study is confirmed.

Discussion

The aim of the present study is to investigate the effect of systemic family therapy on reducing triangulation and improving family boundaries in families involved in emotional divorce among patients referred to mental health centers. The findings of the study are presented as follows:

- Based on the findings of the study, the mean level of family boundary setting in the experimental group that received counseling showed a statistically significant increase compared to the pre-intervention stage. Accordingly, it can be concluded that systemic family therapy has a meaningful and positive effect on improving the level of family boundary setting. Therefore, the first hypothesis of the study is supported.The significant improvement observed in the average family boundary setting among participants in the experimental group suggests that systemic family therapy effectively facilitates the regulation and clarification of boundaries between family members. By establishing clearer and more appropriate boundaries, this therapeutic approach contributes to the creation of a healthier, more balanced, and functional family environment. Moreover, this positive change indicates that systemic family therapy not only assists family members in reconstructing and maintaining their individual identities, but also enhances constructive interactions, promotes mutual respect, and reduces interpersonal conflicts that typically arise from weak, rigid, or inappropriate boundary setting (18,19).
- The results show that the average triangulation in families involved in emotional divorce in the experimental group who were exposed to treatment decreased significantly. Therefore, it can be concluded that systemic family therapy has an effect on triangulation in these families and significantly reduces it. Therefore, the second hypothesis of the study is confirmed. The significant reduction in the amount of triangulation in treated families is evidence that systemic family therapy has been able to identify and correct unhealthy processes involved in family conflicts. This reduction indicates the elimination or reduction of mediation roles and the prevention of third-party involvement in couple conflicts, which in turn leads to greater balance in relationships and reduced psychological stress in family members. Therefore, it can be said that this therapeutic approach has effectively changed unhealthy communication patterns and guided the family structure towards balance and health (20).

Conclusion

Based on these results, it can be concluded that systemic family therapy can be an effective intervention to improve family relationships and reduce

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triangulation in families involved in emotional divorce among patients referring to mental health centers. This can help improve the quality of life of these families and empower them in family boundary setting. Considering these results, we can emphasize the importance of systemic family therapy as a specialized and effective intervention in improving the mental health of families experiencing emotional divorce. The results of the study, consistent with the findings of other studies (5 and 16), emphasize that systemic interventions target not only individual issues but also the entire family system and create sustainable changes that ultimately improve the quality of life and mental health of family members. This doubles the importance of applying systemic approaches in mental health centers and can guide treatment and counseling planning.

Accordingly, the confirmation of the research hypotheses regarding the positive effect of systemic family therapy on reducing triangulation and improving family boundaries demonstrates the capacity of this therapeutic approach to bring about fundamental, meaningful, and enduring changes in family structure and interaction patterns, particularly in families experiencing deep and persistent emotional difficulties. These findings highlight the effectiveness of systemic family therapy in addressing dysfunctional relational dynamics and promoting healthier communication and role differentiation among family members (21). The present study can serve as a valuable foundation for future research and for the design and development of more focused and evidence-based therapeutic interventions in this domain. It is hoped that the results of this research will contribute to the expansion of theoretical knowledge and the improvement of clinical practices in the field of family mental health. Despite its contributions, the study is subject to certain limitations, including challenges related to access to and cooperation from the statistical population, which may have affected participant recruitment and data collection. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies examine the effectiveness of systemic family therapy in comparison with or in combination with other therapeutic interventions, in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of its relative and synergistic effects.

Acknowledgment:

The author is very grateful to the mental health centers in Tehran, who cooperated to the fullest.

Funding:

None

Authors Contributions:

The author contributed to the data analysis. Drafting, revising and approving the article, responsible for all aspects of this work.

Ethical Consideration:

The research data and literature have not been copied from any worksauthor upon reasonable request.

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