

The Effect of Problem-Focused Group Counseling Through Comprehensive Approach on Cognitive Regulation of Male Adolescents

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Abstract

In spite of many previous similar studies which had also examined the effect of a certain approach in terms of groups, the emphasis of the current study is on the efficacy of groups and group counseling instead of a certain therapeutic theory. Therefore, this study has been carried out on male adolescents in heterogeneous groups in Zahedan, Iran, with the aim to study the effect of problem-focused group counseling through comprehensive approach on their cognitive regulation. This applied study has been a pre-test post-test quasi-experiment done via CERQ-short. The statistical population includes all the adolescent students in fall of 2023. The questionnaires were referred to students by school counselors, and two institutions were selected through accidental cluster sampling. Twelve students were selected through purposeful convenience sampling. Intervention has been done in ten 2-hour weekly sessions, and research hypothesis test was done through t-test in SPSS 20. In its post-test, the use of maladaptive strategies has had a significant reduction compared to its pre-test ($p < 0.01$), and the post-test for adaptive strategies has had a significant increase compared to its pre-test ($p < 0.01$). The results showed that group counseling without focus on any specific approach can cause an increase in the use of adaptive strategies and a decrease in the use of maladaptive strategies, and therefore it can cause a decrease in adolescents' emotional and behavioral problems.

Keywords: Group Counseling, Adolescents, Cognitive Emotion Regulation, Comprehensive Approach.

Introduction

Psychoanalyst theorists have defined adolescence as a condition in which an adolescent endures mental disorders, and that it is a period of extreme tension, and it includes emotional revolutions (Mussen et al., 1969). Just as basic motivations, emotions can activate and conduct behaviors. Despite the similarities between motivations and emotions, the former is activated internally, whereas the latter is activated externally (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2014). One of the most disturbing experiences for humans is the separation from their emotions and the ignorance about how to deal with their intensity. As a result, they might turn to troublesome coping strategies such as substance abuse, gormandizing, blame-shifting, forced dependence on watching pornographic content, ruminating, agitation, and other unsuccessful strategies. Some individuals avoid situations which cause disturbing emotions, or remain passive and isolated. Therefore, there is an increase in their feelings of inefficiency and depression. Also, another group blames others because of their own feelings and causes an intensification in depression and deprivation from important supportive resources (Leahy et al., 2011). Garnefski et al. (2001)

declared that the emotion regulation is a process by which one can modify one's emotions in order to achieve a desired outcome. On the other hand, Aronson and Scheidlinger (2002) determined that adolescence and group living are inseparably interwoven. It is because of the fact that adolescents' everyday life involves groups, and group counseling can often provide a safe and comfortable place for change (Berg et al., 2017).

Group counseling and group psychotherapy is a widely accepted psychiatric treatment modality, and in it, the therapeutic forces in the group are used to change maladaptive behaviors of distressed individuals (Sadock et al., 2015). The comprehensive approach brings up the key question of what therapeutic activity is more suitable for what difficulty, for which therapist, and for what patient (Navabi Nezhad, 2015). Furthermore, in problem-focused groups with different difficulties, when a participant proposes his/her problem, others set out to help by support, feedback, and representing information and experiences. In problem-focused group counseling, the focus is on the patient's personal problems

and emotions, and due to the fact that transparency and mutual feedback are the main tools for working on feelings, the existence of an emotional relationship is of great importance, and group counseling creates it by laying the groundwork for intimacy between participants (Sanaei, 2015). Many previous studies have shown the effect of different approaches through group counseling on emotion regulation:

Chonthannathi et al. (2022) assessed the effects of cognitive behavioral group therapy (CBGT) in stress reduction and emotion regulation increase for Thai adolescents in middle school. After the intervention, they reported a significant reduction in stress, and a significant increase in emotion regulation. Kashefinishabouri et al. (2021) assessed the effect of cognitive therapy training based on mindfulness and emotion regulation on rumination and social anxiety of prone to addiction adolescents. The results showed that cognitive therapy based on mindfulness and emotion regulation training can be used for the reduction of social stress and rumination in prone to addiction adolescents. Holmqvist Larsson et al. (2019), in their pilot study, inspected if training for group skills related to emotion regulation for adolescents and parents can be used as a complementary intervention in an outpatient pediatric psychiatry clinic. They came to the conclusion that the scale of difficulties in emotion regulation had a great improvement for both the adolescents and parents. In spite of the many researches done in this domain, a research on the effect of group counseling on emotion regulation for adolescents with various problems without an emphasis on any specific approach was not found. Also, it seems like the researchers have not valued the effect of the group as an effective and independent variable while representing their research hypotheses. Therefore, the aim of the research ahead is to inspect if group counseling without focus on any specific approaches will balance or change the troublesome emotional strategies, and if it ameliorates the cognitive emotional regulation in adolescents with variable problems.

Research Method

Statistic Population

The current research is applied, and is done through semi-empirical method alongside the design of preliminary and final examinations. The statistical population included all the male adolescents in lower and higher secondary schools in Zahedan who were diagnosed with behavioral and emotional problems by school counselors and were referred to counseling centers and institutions across the city.

Sampling

Amongst the institutions, two were chosen through randomized cluster sampling, and amongst the students, 12 were chosen through purposeful convenience sampling.

Instrument

The instrument used in this research was the shortened form of cognitive emotional regulation questionnaire (CERQ) which has been developed by Garnefski et al. (2001) and is a multi-purpose questionnaire used for detecting cognitive coping strategies of individuals after experiencing distressing events. This questionnaire is a self-report instrument and is consisted of nine subscales: self-blame cognitive strategies, other-blame, ruminating, and catastrophizing as maladaptive strategies, and putting into Perspective, positive refocusing, positive reappraisal, acceptance, and planning as adaptive strategies. The questionnaire has 18 questions and each subscale is consisted of 2 items, and each item is assessed via five-level Likert scale (from 1 as never to 5 as almost always). According to the investigation by Hassani (2011) on the Persian version of shortened CERQ, it was found as highly valid, and the correlation between the subscales was strong.

Implementation Method

The criterion for taking part in the research were giving conscious assent for taking part in group sessions, commitment to constant presence in the sessions, not receiving any consulting services rather than the research while taking part in the sessions, and not taking psychiatric medication. Intervention was done in 10 weekly sessions, and the participants sat in circles. This provided the chance for eye contact in a well-conditioned atmosphere at the counseling and cognitive medical service center for students in Zahedan province. The main principles of the group work included genuine, free, and sincere expression of the real-time experienced thoughts and emotions, or the emotions from the past which still existed, and also giving expressive feedback by the participants starting with "I..." and avoiding all kinds of advice, criticism, and scorn. Also the devotion to confidentiality outside the sessions was emphasized on. Raising issues were suggested to be done by asking cognitive questions starting with "Do I ...?" by the participants for discussions about the related subjects and common problems of adolescents. The expression of thoughts and emotions and giving feedback alongside sharing some related experiences, and other aspects of group counseling, were of great importance. Selective and universal interventions, including cognitive behavioral therapy, rational emotive behavior therapy, solution-oriented approach etc. and client-centered therapy were alternatively used both overtly and covertly by the counselor and the therapist, based on the matter being discussed, the atmosphere of the session, and interpersonal differences to establish the framework for the sessions.

Table 1: Summary of Sessions:

Sessions	Stages	Session Content
1	Forming	Familiarizing and introduction by first names. - Determining the goal, the days, the time, and session time by all the participants.- The rationale includes confidentiality, free and sincere expression of thoughts, emotions, and experiences, without the fear of scorn and judgment by others.
2	Transition	First, the leader of the group expressed his feelings and referred to the way they were shaped and their effect. - Determination of the subject by the participants: “What is my reaction in the face of what I can’t go along with, and what are its results?”- Interaction between the participants and receiving feedback.
3	Performing	Dialogue: Each person owns their thoughts, values, mental defenses, and emotions. Participants became eager to help each other and the condition for finding solutions and the group therapeutic atmosphere were shaped. The expression of feelings. Subject:” What is the reason behind taste and desire difference between me and my parents, and how do I handle them?” – Role paly of the parents by some participants.
4	Performing	Expression of feelings – counselor activity was reduced – Subject of dialogue: “What features of me am I unhappy with which I’m ready to change?” The exercise for the week was to make a table including 3 columns: the first being “Characteristics I don’t have, but I hope I’ll have”, the second being “is this characteristic achievable?”, and the third being “If yes, how, and if not, why?”
5	Performing	The exact expression of feelings – a revision on the previous week’s exercise, which is the exact and sincere expression of personal feelings of the leader of the session – Subject: Q&A on nameless papers – The advice was to start the answers with the word “I”, meaning that they are personal, and that advice and scorn should be avoided.
6	Performing	The exact expression of feelings – Subject determination: “How do I feel about courses, teachers, and school, and to what extent do my education and major impact my life?” – Determination of a short-term educational schedule as the exercise at home.
7	Performing	Sincere expression of emotions and feelings – Subject determination: “Do I have grumpy or violent behaviors, and do I act in a way which disrespect my own or other’s values?”
8	Performing	The expression of feelings from today or the existing ones from previous days. – Subject selection: “How do I react to others’ criticism, and how do I criticize someone when I do?” – Q&A on the reason for criticism and the place of critics in our lives. – Role playing of a critic by some participants. – Week exercise: How are our criticisms and how do we express them?
9	Performing	The exact and sincere expression of feelings – revising the experience of the exercise of previous session. – Subject selection: “What do I feel for the opposite gender? How do I think and act about this matter? Have I ever fallen in love?” – Speaking in turns about the subject and receiving feedback.
10	Termination	Free expression of emotions. – Subject selection: “What positive features, talents, and goals do I have? Are my goals realistic? – Announcing the end of the sessions and evaluating the quality of goal accomplishment. – The suggestion for continuing the sessions by some participants and a discussion for making the decision and achieving consensus by all the participants for continuing the sessions. – Approval for continuing the sessions alongside the introduction of new participants by the management of the educational department of Zahedan – carrying out the post-test of the study and thanking all the participants.

Findings

The statistical methods used in this research are descriptive statistics, including the mean and the standard deviation of the variables, and also inferential statistics in order to test the hypotheses of the research using dependent t-test, and a comparison between the results of pre-test and post-test.

The age range of the participants was between 16 to 18, and the 18 year-olds had the most abundance. The internal consistency of the research subscales in pre-test and post-test was calculated using Cronbach’s alpha, and it was higher than 0.77 which implies a high internal consistency between the items of each subscale.

Table 2: Statistics for Adaptive and Maladaptive Coping Strategies in Pre-test and Post-test

Dependent Variable	Maladaptive Strategies		Adaptive Strategies	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Test				
Sample count	12	12	12	12
Internal Validity (Cronbach's alpha)	0.91	0.85	0.81	0.78
Item Count	8	8	10	10
Mean	7.10	4.84	5.93	8.00
Standard Deviation	1.79	1.36	1.52	1.35
T-test for Dependent Variable	6.81		-7.29	
Df	11		11	
Sig.	0.0005		0.0005	

Based on the data from table 2, the sample size is 12. Cognitive emotional regulation questionnaire with 18 items having gained a bigger than 0.77 Cronbach's alpha shows a proper reliability. Mean and standard deviation of maladaptive strategies in pre-test are 7.10 and 1.79, and they are reduced to 4.84 and 1.36 in the post-test, respectively. Also, in the pre-test of adaptive strategies, they are respectively recorded as 5.93 and 1.52 which are changed to 8.00 and 1.35 in the post-test. Later on, the dependent t-test was carried out between pre-test and post-test of maladaptive strategies as $t, 11=Df= 6.81$ and $p<0.01$, implying with 99% assurance that the post-test for maladaptive strategies was less than the pre-test. In the post-test for adaptive strategies, it was calculated as $t, 11=Df= -7.29$ and $P<0.01$ which shows with 99% certainty that the post-test for adaptive strategies is more than its pre-test.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this paper suggest that group counseling, despite any kind of therapeutic method, has an effect on the positive changes in cognitive regulation for adolescents. Therefore, it seems like the adolescents with different and diverse problems managed to significantly reduce their use of maladaptive strategies and increase their use of adaptive strategies by taking part in group counseling.

In confirmation of the research hypotheses and the positive change of cognitive emotional regulation factors, it can be said that not feeling unique due to the self-disclosure of the participants and the awareness of similar difficulties causes a reduction in subscales of catastrophizing and self-blame. In the reduction of other-blame, it seems like the lack of judgment, scorn, and unconditional positive regard, which are key components of group counseling, has been effective on self-focus and the reduction of other-blame. In the reduction of rumination, it can be said that the practice of expression of feelings and thoughts without fear can cause a reduction in rumination, and that self-expression and self-disclosure learnt in the group counseling sessions have caused self-discovery and an increase in acceptance as well. Furthermore, the adaptive and achieved strategy of the research has caused an insight leading to the start of constructive changes which have inevitably caused a refocus on planning. In addition, the personal experiences as feedback, a necessity of group counseling, shows how in the face of similar events, individuals

react differently, and therefore by the help of a change in appraisal, emotion and behavior can be changed too, and the achievement of this insight can lead to the use of positive reappraisal and putting into perspective.

Although no research on group counseling without focus on any specific method for emotion regulation of male adolescents with various problems was found, the results of the current research goes along with (Illanloo et al., 2022; Nooripour et al., 2023; Tavakoli & Mirghaemi, 2023), and in (Chonthannathi et al., 2022), as well as the current research, group counseling for male adolescents with various problems caused positive changes in all the factors of emotion regulation, but as for the sample size and age and gender limitations in the current research, its generalizations requires further investigation. It can be realized that group counseling is a contributing factor that cannot be denied under the shadow of other methods.

There is not much hesitation for explaining the effect of group-as-a-whole (Yalom & Molyn Leszcz, 2020), and humans seek the answers which no movement could've answered in group counseling sessions and in communication with other humans (Sanaei, 2015). Countless studies have supported the lack of significance for the difference between the two therapeutic methods, including (Ghadami et al., 2021; Habigzang et al., 2016; Haghghi et al., 2022). Nevertheless, few studies have shown slight differences for the effectiveness of the two approaches as they were used in groups, but the effect of both the approaches has been significant considering the pre-task.

It is notable that in the hypothesis confirmation of these studies, group counseling has been the only shared feature as a dependent variable, and the shared feature in interventions in all the therapeutic approaches. Therefore, perhaps it could be said that groups and group counseling, having acquired the necessary criterion, are efficient on their own, and besides the emphasis on the effectiveness of group dynamics in group counseling, it's been shown in this study that omitting prejudice and consideration of adequacy for a specific method will provide us with a universal and multi-dimensional method alongside the natural function of a group, and these will accompany us with a unity and a hidden coherence in different methods which will lead to rewarding results.

Limitations of the Study

Due to the reason that the statistical population included middle school students, after sampling, their presence in the group counseling sessions required allowance from their parents which sometimes lead to high expectations or rejections.

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