

Effectiveness of Emotion Regulation Instruction on Interpersonal Problems among Female High School Students

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Abstract

Aim: This study was conducted to observe the effectiveness of emotion regulation instruction on interpersonal problems among 10th-grade female students in 2016–2017. **Methodology:** We used the quasi-experimental method and conducted pretests and posttests on the control group. Statistical population of this study is comprised of all 10th-grade female students of Neyshabur (Khorasan Razavi Province). In this study, 30 female students were selected by multistage randomized cluster sampling. Then, they were randomly placed in the central and experimental groups (15 students in each group). Inventory of interpersonal problem questionnaire was used to measure the level of interpersonal problems among the students. The results of this questionnaire were confirmed and its Cronbach's alpha value was 0.88. We performed our emotion regulation instruction for the experimental group during 8 sessions that each lasted 90 min; these instruction sessions were held once a week, and the control group was also included in the list. At the end of these sessions, both the groups were reassessed. **Results:** The results of this study showed that there is a significant difference ($P < 0.001$) between the experimental and the control groups in the level of their interpersonal problems. Considering the level of emotion regulation effectiveness, we can allegedly claim that 87.6% of changes in interpersonal problems are a result of emotion regulation instruction. **Conclusion:** It seems that by instructing emotion regulation in schools, the level of interpersonal problems among students can be reduced. The emotion regulation as a model of behavior triggers social support for adolescents. Social support can lead to solve interpersonal problems. Implications of emotion regulation model for basic and clinical research on close relationships are discussed.

Keywords: Emotion regulation instruction, female students, interpersonal problems

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a period in which physical, emotional, and mental changes occur in an individual. During this phase, the child transitions into an adult. An individual's interests, preferences, fantasies, mood swings, and physical attributes undergo changes in this period. These changes cause a person to be more sensitive and increase his/her interpersonal problems; therefore, most psychologists consider this period to be full of emotional turmoil.^[1] Interpersonal problems are issues that a person experiences in his/her relationships with others. These problems may cause mental crisis in an individual.^[2]

Furthermore, interpersonal problems play an important role in various types of psychopathology.^[3-5] Issues with certainty, sociability, obedience, intimacy, responsibility, and emotional restraint are among a person's interpersonal problems.^[6] Some of the experts believe that severe problems in interpersonal relationships are an indication of personality disorders; thus, people with interpersonal difficulties are more likely to suffer from severe personality disorders.^[7]

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Interpersonal problems are also related to depression.^[8] Interpersonal problems among students may cause negative effects such as academy failure, loneliness, suicide, early school dropout, dysfunctional relationships, and drug abuse.^[9] Adolescence is a period in which a person undergoes physical, emotional, and social changes and experiences intense emotions. If he/she cannot regulate his/her emotions, he/she will have more interpersonal problems regarding the mental pressure of his/her surroundings.^[10] Hence, emotion regulation in adolescence can be a solution to reduce these emotional conflicts.

Psychological studies show that emotional self-regulation is an important factor in the students' mental health, improved school performance, and especially, social interactions.^[11] It has become clear that emotion regulation plays a critical role in mental health and having better social relations.^[12,13] Poor emotion regulation may cause internalizing disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety, and social isolation) and externalizing disorders (e.g., delinquency and aggressive behaviors).^[14] Therefore, focusing on ways to confront emotions during negative experiences of adolescence can be critical because there is a strong connection between internalizing problems and negative thinking or cognitive distortion among individuals.

The ability to confront emotions empowers a person to understand his/her and others' emotions and their effect on his/her behavior. Through this understanding, he/she can better respond to his/her emotions.^[15] The aim of emotion regulation instruction is to control negative emotions and use emotions positively.^[16] Cole *et al.*^[17] believe that emotion regulation in individuals is an indication of their intense emotions and includes changes in self, emotions, or other psychological processes (such as memory and social interactions).

The studies demonstrate that instructing emotion regulation has been effective in reducing emotional disorders,^[18] drug addiction,^[18] pathology symptoms,^[19] and depression.^[12]

Since adolescence is a period of physical, mental, social changes and intense emotions, many nervous and cognitive systems that deal with emotions develop during this phase.^[20] Accordingly, Hampel and Petermann^[21] claim that focusing on confronting one's emotions during the negative occurrences of this period can be important because internalizing problems and negative thinking or cognitive distortion among individuals are strongly connected. Based on the previous sections, the importance of adolescence and emotion regulation effect in reducing behavioral problems, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of emotion regulation instruction on adolescent female students' interpersonal problems.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, the semi-experimental method and pretest/posttest with control group design were used. All the 10th-grade female students of Neyshabur in 2016–2017 were used as

the statistical population. Among them, 30 individuals were selected by a multistage randomized cluster sampling method. First, two schools were randomly selected among 39 high schools. Then, three classes were chosen from each school and five individuals were randomly singled out from each class. Eventually, these individuals were placed in the control and experimental groups (15 individuals in each group). Inclusion criteria were including having age between 13 and 18 years, being female, and not having any psychological disorders. Exclusion criteria were including having contest to participate in the research and not having more than two absences in intervention sessions.

Research tools

Inventory of Interpersonal Problems–Short Form

The short version of this questionnaire was formulated by Barkham *et al.*^[22] This questionnaire includes these subscales: assertiveness and sociability, openness, caring, aggression, supportiveness and involvement, and dependency. In Iran, Fath *et al.*^[23] performed a factor analysis for this questionnaire. Their results showed that among the eight subscales, only six were confirmed. Furthermore, the correlation coefficient of convergent validity for this questionnaire and for the Alexithymia scale was 0.53. The reliability of this questionnaire was calculated using Cronbach's alpha for subscales of assertiveness and sociability, openness, caring, aggression, supportiveness and involvement, and dependency; the resulting values were 0.83, 0.63, 0.60, 0.83, 0.71, and 0.63, respectively. The total score was 0.82.

Table 1 shows the contents and planning of emotion regulation instruction sessions based on Gross's model.^[15] The data were analyzed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) method.

RESULTS

In this section, we analyze the descriptive and inferential findings, respectively. The mean and standard deviation for the experimental group members were 15.53 and 0.74 and 15.33 and 0.62 for the control group. Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of the subjects' interpersonal problems.

As shown in Table 2, the interpersonal problem subscales among the two groups are different. To study the significance of this difference, we used the multivariate ANCOVA (MANCOVA). All premises were observed for this analysis. The multivariate analysis results in Wilks' lambda measure specified that there is a significant difference in one of the subscales among the two groups. For a more accurate data analysis, an ANCOVA was used in MANCOVA model. The results are shown in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, the results of multivariate covariance analysis showed that there is a significant difference between all the subscales of interpersonal problems among the two groups. Considering the mean tables, we can state that instructing adolescent female students in the experimental group on emotion regulation has been effective in reducing their interpersonal problems.

Table 1: The contents and planning of treatment in the experimental group

Sessions	Contents	Goal	Agenda
Session 1	Familiarity	Familiarity with the treatment plan	Acquaintance between the group members and the leader's (counselor) interaction with the members Stating the main and secondary goals of the group and group discussion about collective and personal goals Stating the logic of treatment and intervention stages Stating the rules of participation in the group
Session 2	Choosing the event	Providing emotional instruction	Recognizing the emotions and triggering events through the instructions on different functions of each emotion Providing information about different aspects of emotions and their long-term and short-term effects
Session 3	Choosing the vent	Assessing the members' vulnerability and emotional skills	Discussion among group members regarding the role of emotions in human mental adaptability and their advantages, role of emotions in connecting with others and affecting them and also, controlling emotions, human trigger behaviors Discussing real experiences
Session 4	Improving the situation	Changing the conditions of the event	Preventing social isolation and avoidance Instructions on problem-solving strategies Instructions on interpersonal skills
Session 5	Developing mental focus	Shifting focus	Stopping obsessive rumination and anxiety Instructions on focus
Session 6	Cognitive appraisal	Changing cognitive assessment	Recognizing the false cognitive assessments and their effects on emotional moods Instructions on cognitive reappraisal
Session 7	Regulating the emotional response	Changing the behavioral and physiological effects of emotions	Recognizing the measure of emotional suppression and examining its consequences Confrontation Instructions on expressing emotions Improving behavior through changing emotional amplifiers in a person's surroundings Instructions on emotional discharge, relaxation, and reverse psychology
Session 8	Assessment and function	Reassessment and removing barriers to effective emotional function	Assessing the achievement of personal and collective goals Using learned skills in the natural environment Assessing and removing the barriers to performing the given tasks in these sessions

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation of interpersonal problems

Variables	Group	Mean		SD	
		Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Aggression	Experiment	21	17.33	5.49	4.29
	Control	21.93	20.93	5.09	5.12
Assertiveness and Sociability	Experiment	17.73	13.93	6.7	3.22
	Control	17.8	17.53	5.13	4.93
Openness	Experiment	9.4	6.67	3.85	3.11
	Control	9.1	9.67	4.69	2.94
Caring	Experiment	11.6	8.6	3.09	2.99
	Control	11.47	9.73	3.81	2.55
Supportiveness and Involvement	Experiment	11.27	10.73	3.81	2.44
	Control	10.33	7.53	2.19	3.63
Dependency	Experiment	9.33	7.53	3.7	3.16
	Control	9.4	10.27	2.2	3.59

SD: Standard deviation

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to examine the emotion regulation instruction effectiveness in reducing interpersonal problems. The study results show that in posttest stage of the two groups (experimental and control), instructions on emotion regulation have led to the decrease of interpersonal

problems. These results corroborate with the results of other studies.^[24-32]

Therefore, the results of this study can be interpreted as such: interpersonal problems may cause inefficient social interactions and lack of assertiveness in students. Due to this fact, adolescents with interpersonal problems are not assertive and have difficulty regulating their emotions; therefore, they are not skilled in their social relations and do not have the proper social skills. Emotion regulation instruction can be effective in improving social interactions and interpersonal problems. We can claim that emotion regulation is a personal capability that helps individuals to adapt in their social interactions. Poor emotion regulation may lead to interpersonal problems, depression, and personality disorders.^[33] Gross^[15] found that suppressing emotions may decline cognitive capabilities. Emotion regulation skills facilitate the teacher–student relations. Cognitive assessment of students' behavior will improve their attitudes and learning skills and consequently increases their motivation and success. Hence, emotion regulation instruction can be seen as a method of reducing interpersonal problems. According to Ciarrochi *et al.*,^[34] students who are socially efficient effectively cope with emotions and their effects and manage them. Theoretically, emotion regulation variables such as acceptance may allow

Table 3: The results of analysis of covariance in multivariate analysis of covariance for interpersonal problems

Variables	SS	df	MS	F	P	Effect size
Aggression	57.59	1	57.59	7.21	0.01	0.73
Caring	11.05	1	11.05	1.81	0.01	0.25
Assertiveness and sociability	120.57	1	120.57	9.59	0.01	0.84
Supportiveness and involvement	68.71	1	68.71	6.77	0.01	0.7
Dependency	54.97	1	54.97	4.64	0.01	0.54
Openness	78.03	1	78.03	29.75	0.01	1

SS: Sum of square, df: Degree of freedom, MS: Mean square

individuals who are emotionally vulnerable to live in the present; as a result, they can have a more objective view, rather than having an extreme reaction to their surroundings. People who use poor emotion regulation strategies, ineffective emotional response, and avoidance are more inclined to control their turbulent emotions and balance themselves emotionally when faced with stressful situations. Instead of confronting the source of their stress and finding a solution, they resort to personal methods that can control the negative consequences of mental pressure (e.g., tensions and emotional problems). Using poor emotion regulation strategies during a mental crisis may cause a person to avoid confronting his/her problems and not deal with them in a focused manner.^[35,36] On the other hand, focusing on finding a solution means that a person has to try consciously to logically assess the source of his/her stress; this method focuses more on the source of the stress. The proper understanding of emotions is essential to interpersonal relations. The difficulties in understanding emotions and inefficient emotional connection with others may cause many problems in an individual's interpersonal relations. These individuals often experience emotions which they feel they cannot escape from. They are not very cognizant of their emotions; therefore, since they feel as if they have no control over their emotions, they do not strive to control them.

CONCLUSION

Emotion regulation instruction can reduce these problems. Hence, emotion regulation can be effective in reducing interpersonal problems. In fact, poor emotion regulation strategies are dangerous for mental health and may lead to physical health problems. Recognizing these ineffective strategies and instructions on better methods can help us prevent these difficulties; as a result, this mental dysfunction will not become prevalent in the society. Accordingly, we can improve the students' mental health and reduce their interpersonal problems by providing emotion regulation instruction in schools.

There were limitations in conducting this research; namely, the statistical population of this research was limited to Neyshabur high school female students. Therefore, it is advised to exercise caution in extending the results of this study to other

individuals or students. Furthermore, lack of a follow-up test and controlling all the existing variables simultaneously proved to be problematic.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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