

Group counseling to reduce academic stress in senior high school students

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Abstract

This study examines the effect of group counselling on academic stress of senior high school students. Response to academic demands that cannot be prevented, avoided or controlled amounts to stress. Four senior high school students with high academic stress scores were used as respondents with a quasi-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design. Respondents' academic scores were measured before and after the group counselling was given using the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA). The treatment, in this case, group counselling, was given in five sessions, while anava repeated measures were used to analyze the data. The results showed that group counselling significantly reduces the respondents' academic stress, hence should be used in senior high school students.

Keywords: Academic stress, group counselling

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Introduction

Stress emerges when individuals encounter a threatening situation that they cannot prevent, avoid, or control (Nevid, Rathus & Greene, 2014). Stress can be experienced by various groups of individuals, including students. According to Sumbramani and Venkatachalam (2019), the most significant sources of students' stressors are problems with parents, fear of failing exams, comparing themselves with others, academic value competitions, and too many exams.

Sun, Dunne, Hou, and Xu (2011) established that students' most significant stress source, especially in Asia, is the demanding and pressing academic process. Subramani and Venkatachalam's (2019) research conducted their study in India. The results showed that academic problems contributed 74.7% to 96% in stress experienced by students. Ifdil and Ardi (2013) showed that 71.8% of respondents in senior high school in Indonesia experience academic stress.

The current Indonesian education curriculum currently determines student performance based on academic grades. The new curriculum for Senior Senior high schools (SMA) or the equivalent was piloted in 2016. In the 2016 curriculum, students are required to be more active than teachers (Kemendikbud, 2016). The teaching and learning process is currently filled with more class assignments, practicum, and homework. Students are required to make more material applications rather than continuously listening to the content delivered by the teacher. In the 2016 curriculum, students are divided into two majors, specifically Science and Social Sciences, making the lessons more focused, detailed and specific. In general, the busy school schedule and many assignments put more pressure on students.

The results of adolescent mental health screening conducted on SMA X students in Yogyakarta in 2016 showed that the main trigger for stress in adolescents are academic demands. The initial assessment results showed that a lot of schoolwork and homework, challenging subject matter, practicum reports collected every week, and compulsory activities outside lessons, such as scouting and extracurricular activities, were the main stressors for students. Students need to participate in activities outside lessons, such as scouting

and other extracurricular events after school. Furthermore, they are required to take at least one other extracurricular activity outside scouting with practicum once a week after school ([Report on Mental Health Screening for Senior Senior high school level in Yogyakarta in 2016](#)).

Due to the activities outside the lesson sessions, students always go home in the afternoon from Monday to Thursday. Solid activities, several tasks at school and home, and challenging material are the main stressors for group counselling participants. According to [Chu and Chao \(2012\)](#), multiple and stressful tasks are sources of stressors for students. The previous research and the results of screening and initial assessment show that academic factors are among the leading causes of stress in students.

Academic stress is a feeling of pressure on an individual due to problems related to academics, such as too many assignments, competition between students, pressure for achievement, various tests, and problematic relationships with teachers or other students ([Subramani & Kadiravan, 2017](#)). Therefore, academic stress arises due to academic matters that are perceived to be pressing and threatening.

Uncontrolled and prolonged academic stress hurts the body. According to [Donouhe \(2013\)](#), stress causes various body problems, including digestive and respiratory problems, heart attacks, and cancer. [Taylor \(2015\)](#) stated that diseases such as immune conditions, cardiovascular disorders, asthma, and cancer results from untreated stress. Therefore, academic stress should be treated before it becomes prolonged to avoid health issues or severe psychological problems. Stress coping refers to the way an individual deal with stress ([Wade & Tavis, 2017](#)). According to [Donouhe \(2013\)](#), adaptive stress-coping can minimize stress symptoms physically, emotionally and psychologically.

[Wade and Tavis \(2017\)](#) stated that stress coping could be conducted individually or in groups. For students, stress coping in groups helps deal with the stress experienced. [Ningtias, Wibowo and Purwanto \(2020\)](#) found that group intervention is effective and can reduce students' academic stress. This is in line with [Edwards, Adams, Waldo, Hadfield, and Biegel \(2014\)](#), which showed that group intervention could significantly reduce adolescents' academic stress. Groups have an essential role for students in coping with academic stress. The same fate and agreement regarding academics' problems created a strong feeling of togetherness and a sense of trust, vital in group dynamics.

According to [Corey \(2016\)](#), group-based interventions are divided into three. The first is group counselling, which is a preventive intervention. Group counselling is often used to deal with problems around life. Second, the psychotherapy group or group psychotherapy is used as a treatment or cure. Group psychotherapy is often used to treat cases of moderate to severe psychological disorders. The third type is the psychoeducational group or group psychoeducation that aims to provide certain information. It involves giving material exposure to a group to increase knowledge or provide new knowledge.

[Hill \(2014\)](#) established that counselling is an intervention used for healthy clients with life problems, such as adjustment issues, stress, and other problems not too severe. Similarly, [Corey \(2016\)](#) stated that group counselling focuses on handling problems in education, career or work, social, and personal. Therefore, the appropriate group intervention to handle this case is group counselling.

Group counselling is an intervention given to groups of individuals with mild to moderate problems with simpler stages than group psychotherapy. [Jacobs, Masson, Harvill and Schimmel \(2012\)](#) explained three main stages in group counselling: beginning, working and closing. The beginning stage is the initial stage in group counselling, where introductions between members, formulation of goals, rules and rapport building are conducted. The problem exploration for each group member is also administered. In the working stage is the stage, participants begin to focus on group counselling goals and learn new skills, discuss problems and their solutions, and conduct the assigned tasks. During the closing, the participants discuss what they have learned, the changes experienced, and next plans.

Group counselling was chosen as an intervention in this problem for several reasons. First, the existence of similarities related to students' problems makes it possible to conduct the intervention as a group. Second, the types of problems faced can be resolved through group counselling because they are related to life. According to [Hill \(2014\)](#), stress in life can be handled in group counselling. Academic stress is a problem related to stress in life. Third, there is a special focus on this issue, specifically education. Academic stress is a problem that arises due to pressure in the education sector.

[Corey \(2016\)](#) stated that group counselling plays a vital role for participants through the group's discussion process. According to [Donohue \(2013\)](#), academic stress in senior high school students decreased by 29.49% after group counselling. Therefore, group-based interventions are essential for students

experiencing academic stress. Through groups, students can learn from each other and get input on effective stress coping. The group counselling conducted in this study is based on [Donohue \(2013\)](#).

Method

The respondents' selection was based on the results of mental health screening that was conducted at X Senior Senior high school (SMA) in Yogyakarta. Based on the screening, four respondents with high academic stress scores were selected. The measurement of academic stress was administered using an adaptation of the academic stress scale developed by [Sun et al. \(2011\)](#), specifically the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA).

ESSA is a measuring tool developed to measure students' academic stress based on five aspects, including pressure and demands in the learning process, too much workload, worrying about grades, standards and expectations set on oneself (self-expectation), and confidence in academic disability (despondency). From these five aspects, 16 statement items were developed to measure academic stress, each with five answer options, including never (TP), rarely (J), sometimes (K), often (S), and very often (SS). The score moves from 0 to 4, where all items are favourable. Therefore, the higher the scale score, the higher the academic stress.

This study used a one-group pretest-posttest design, where measurements were made before and after group counselling given to respondents. Before group counselling, participants were given an ESSA to measure academic stress. Notably, academic stress measurements were performed again after group counselling and two weeks later as a follow-up.

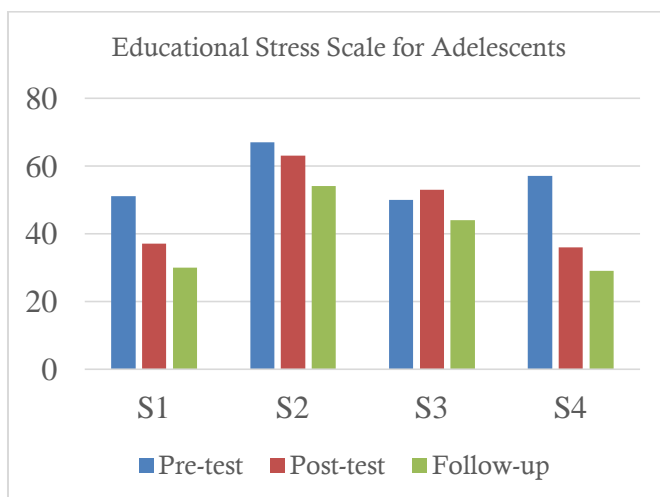
Group counselling consisted of five sessions ([Donohue, 2013](#)). The first session was meant to examine the problem in detail. Several activities were conducted, including rapport building, making goals and counselling contracts, making agreement on rules in group counselling, and examining each group member's problems. The second session was meant to determine the goals and specific steps to achieve the participants' goals. Each participant writes a goal to be achieved through group counselling. Afterwards, they write down and describe the specific steps that must be taken to achieve these goals. The third session determines the participants' positive and negative stress coping and begins with the explanation of the impact of academic stress and coping stresses conducted by each participant. Furthermore, an analysis of stress coping was administered through discussion among participants. The fourth session aims to determine the negative thoughts arising from stress. In this session, the participants analyzed the negative thoughts that arise when experiencing academic stress. Discussions between participants were conducted to generate more positive thoughts. The fifth session discusses the specific steps that have been prepared in the first session. Participants describe the steps to be taken after the group counselling ends for academic stress to remain under control.

Data analysis used anava repeated measures to determine how group counselling affected academic stress among respondents. Apart from quantitative measurements, interviews were conducted to determine respondents' changes before and during the intervention.

Results and Discussion

[Taylor \(2015\)](#) stated that individuals experience physical, emotional, behavioural, and cognitive changes when under stress. The assessment showed physical, emotional and cognitive changes in the participants when faced with sources of stress, specifically academic problems. Physically, the participants experienced changes in body weight, dizziness, vertigo, stomach pain, menstrual irregularities, and changes in sleep patterns. When tired, especially after coming home from school, the participants were irritated by trivial things and would cry for no reason. Feeling tired from learning at school made the participants procrastinate doing homework and chose fun activities, such as watching television or playing with cellphones. Cognitive changes that occur include the emergence of thoughts about the inability to undergo the learning process because it is too heavy.

After attending group counselling, the participants experienced positive changes, as shown by the scale and interviews results. The participants' academic stress scores measured after group counselling also showed a decrease. The interviews showed that the participants felt better. Group counselling makes the participants feel like they agree and raises new awareness about what to do based on colleagues' suggestions. During follow-up (two weeks after group counselling), the participants could better manage their time and the academic stress they experienced. Furthermore, they acknowledged doing school work without delaying it so that the assignments did not accumulate.



Graph 1. Academic stress score results

Quantitatively, the detailed changes in group participants are described in Graph 1. The changes that occur before and after group counselling is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Changes after conducting group counseling

Before Group Counseling	After Group Counseling
Feelings of being overwhelmed and pressured by the learning process full of deadlines	Feeling confident and relief after telling the story.
Feelings of being unable to deal with academic pressures that have been felt so far	Insight into what to do through suggestions from other participants
Doing more emotional focus coping (relaxing and having fun), but not problem focus coping (dealing with sources of stress)	Participants could better manage academic stress experienced by emotional focus coping (relaxing for a moment when feeling depressed) and problem focus coping (dealing with sources of stress, namely school work)
Emotional focus coping made participants more relax than do tasks	Participants could better manage their time, when to relax and when to do assignments.

Changes after conducting group counselling (Name. 2016).

Table 2. Data analysis results

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig	Partial Eta Squared
Wilks' Lambda	0.002	5.480E2a	2.000	2.000	0.002	0.998

The reduction in stress levels that occur in group counselling participants can also be determined using statistical data. The statistical analysis test using anava repeated measures showed the value of $p=0.002$ ($p<0.005$). These results indicate a significant difference in stress level scores before the intervention, after intervention and follow-up. This significant stress level change is influenced by the group counselling conducted, which affects 99.8% of changes in participants' significant stress levels before the intervention, after the intervention, and follow-up.

The same fate and acceptance as a classmate and one department friend created cohesiveness during the intervention process. All participants were willing to share their thoughts without feeling embarrassed or threatened. Moreover, the discussion process was more active because it builds a sense of trust among group participants who do not hesitate to respond to one another. According to [Yalom and Leszcz \(2011\)](#), feelings of similarity with other group members make participants more comfortable discussing personal things and becoming a cathartic medium because they feel entirely accepted by group members.

The effectiveness of group counselling is also supported by a strong commitment by all participants who always arrive on time and actively participate in the process. Outside the counselling session, the participants applied suggestions given to reduce stress. Furthermore, they remained committed to managing the academic stress experienced after the intervention ended. The results of measuring academic stress scores during the follow-up session decreased in all participants. Jacobs et al. (2012) stated that exemplary commitment in group counselling creates a cooperative attitude and minimizes group participants' resistance.

The therapeutic relationship during the group counselling process, either between group participants or group participants with the facilitator, is vital in group counselling success. Kivlighan Jr and Kivlighan III (2014) showed that therapeutic relationships affect the processes and outcomes in group counselling, such as the interactions, the emotional expressions, the awareness that arises, and the willingness to change, and the positive changes. During group counselling, the participants felt accepted, understood, and supported by colleagues and the facilitator, making them actively involved in the process. Furthermore, they were ready to change for the better and conduct the group counselling process earnestly.

The process and results of group counselling showed that one participant's enthusiasm and positive response influenced others. At the first meeting with the facilitator, one participant showed enthusiasm and a strong desire to participate in group counselling. After the first session, the participants explained their experience clearly and completely. This made others enthusiastic about the group counselling process, including telling what they have experienced and making efforts to change for the better. A strong desire or determination to change in participants affects the success of group counselling. Prochaska and Norcross (2010) explained that awareness and a strong willingness for individuals to change are essential in the success of interventions that encourage individuals to be better.

The cohesiveness influences the willingness to change in group counselling. Yalom and Leszcz (2011) emphasized that cohesiveness in group counselling means the closeness between participants and the facilitator. The higher the group's cohesiveness, the higher the togetherness and willingness to change (Branscome & Baron, 2017). The intimacy between the participants creates a sense of togetherness and gives them the desire to change for the better. This shows that the strong desire to change in participants affects group counselling and its effectiveness in reducing academic stress.

Conclusion

Group counselling is one of the appropriate interventions for reducing academic stress in senior high school students. This study showed that the participants' academic stress decreased quantitatively and qualitatively after group counselling, though its effectiveness depends on how the process runs. The feeling of the same fate among group members, strong commitment, existing therapeutic relationships, cohesiveness, and the desire to change in the group are essential points supporting group counselling's success. The participants' activeness in the counselling session and outside the counselling session also supports the success of this intervention. Their full involvement in the group counselling process influences the confidence and willingness to use other participants' suggestions. Therefore, the dynamics that occur during the group counselling process are essential to its success.

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