



Original Research Article

The Effects of Social Group Work on Adolescent Emotional Stress

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of social group work on emotional stress among adolescent students. **Method:** Two separate groups (male=30 and female=30) of 6-8th grade students was selected by simple random sampling and participated in eight weeks of structured social group work that took place during the school day and focused on students' stress. Data was collected via Emotional Stress questionnaire ($\alpha = .76$). T-test were used for analyze the data. **Findings:** The results indicated that social group work does indeed reduce stress among adolescents of both genders, although had the more effect on female rather than male students. **Conclusion:** Social group work program conducted in the school setting appears to be a useful intervention for reducing stress among adolescent students. Male and female students do show some differences in the quantity of stress reported and in the response to social group work.

Keywords: Adolescent students/Social group work/Emotional stress.

INTRODUCTION

Stress is an ambiguous concept; it applies to many different phenomena and eludes precise definition. Stress may have very different meanings for each individual, and even scientists have widely varying definitions of it. For example, Selye (1974) described stress as any stimulus in the environment that upsets an individual's homeostasis or balance. These changes can be either positive or negative but either way they affect the person's life in some form or another (Gladding, 1999 p. 264). Schmitz and Hipp (1995) reported in their study that 21% of teens and adolescents reported feeling under stress or pressure "most or all

of the time" and that rates escalated each year from sixth to 12th grade. Actually one of the most stressful periods in human development is the period of adolescence, which has been characterized as "a time of unevenness and paradoxes marked by personal change" (Gladding, 1999 p. 473). Gladding (1999) noted that "adolescents must cope with crisis in identity, extraordinary peer pressures, dramatic personal changes, impending career decisions, the desire for independence, and self doubt" (p. 264). Actually adolescents face the pressures of accepting the new roles and responsibilities of behaving like an adult while at the same time not having all of the

freedoms and privileges of adulthood. Adolescent emotional stress has been observed to lead to various psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, delinquent behavior, decreased self-esteem, eating disorders, and suicidality (Hains, 1994). If the individual has not learned appropriate coping strategies in emotional stress has also been linked to health issues often occurring later in life, such as high blood pressure and cholesterol levels (Ames & Offord, et al. 2005), heart disease and cancer (Schmitz & Hipp, 1995). Increased stress during adolescence can also lead to health problems secondary to drinking, drug use, or smoking. Therefore, it is important for adolescents to learn to have confidence in themselves and their personal resources to cope with life stressors such as family, social (peer), academic, and societal challenges.

In addition research has noted gender differences in stress. There have been differences found in boys' and girls' perceptions of stress, frequency of stressful events, and coping styles used to combat stressful situations (Frydenberg, 1997). There are differences in the types of stressors that boys and girls report as causing them the most distress. Girls often cite interpersonal, social, relationship, and family stressors as most problematic, while boys report more school related stressors (Sullivan, 2003). Frydenberg (1997) reported that "not only are adolescent girls concerned about more things than boys but girls report experiencing more stressful events and they are more affected by stressful events than are boys"(p. 13). Jose and Ratcliffe (2004) stated that "girls reported significantly more stressful events from age 12 to 17 than boys and girls showed higher levels of internalizing from age 13" (p.145). Jose & Ratcliffe (2004) argued that the a possible reason for this gender discrepancy is that girls are more

"responsive and reactive to a stressful event" which leads to the notion that it is not the stressor itself that has a more negative effect on girls but it is rather that girls' coping mechanisms for dealing with stress are different (p.145).

Although there are differing perspectives on the ways adolescents cope, and the apparent gender differences, most agree on the importance of group work programs surrounding this issue (Schmitz & Hipp, 1995). As a matter of fact emotional stress in adolescence is an important issue for social workers because many adolescents feel that their coping strategies in dealing with stress are ineffective (De Anda et al., 1997). Therefore, it is important for social workers to provide adolescents instruction in specific coping and stress management techniques to promote their well-being and avoid distress (De Anda, 1998). In this area group work can be especially beneficial for adolescents because "the adolescent peer group serves a crucial role in the developmental tasks of this age group (Arronson, 2004 p. 174). The group context provides adolescents a safe environment to express themselves, be heard, experiment with new skills and practice them with their peers and with adults. In a group format adolescents can also practice their interpersonal skills, gain a sense of identity and intimacy with other members and attain greater self-awareness through peer interactions (Gladding, 1999 p. 266). Adolescents may talk more freely with other adolescents in a group than one on one with an adult (Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 1998). Finding acceptance and encouragement from group members and adult leaders can be great agents to facilitate change (Gladding, 1999 p. 266). Therefore this study was conducted to determine the effect of social group work on emotional stress among adolescent students.

Objectives of Research

In view of the above, the researchers have set the following objectives:

1. To determine whether or not social group work relieves symptoms of emotional stress among adolescent students.
2. To examine whether the effects of the social group work intervention differed among boys and girls students.

Research Hypotheses

1. Social group work could reduce emotional stress among adolescent students.
2. Social group work has different effect on boys and girls students in reducing their emotional stress.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were students at a working class middle school in Isfahan. The middle school is made up of 51% males and 49% females. Two separate groups (male=30 and female=30) of 6-8th grade students was selected by simple random sampling and participated in eight weeks of structured social group work that took place during the school day and focused on students' emotional stress. Participation in the group was voluntary. Students did not receive any fees, extra credit or any other rewards for participation. Participants were given a pre-test to measure emotional stress prior to participation in the group and the same instrument as a post-test at the conclusion of the group work. The test is entitled *University of Minnesota Adolescent Health Program: Measuring Emotional Stress* (from Blum & Resnick, 1986).

Procedure

Each group participated in eight weeks of group sessions that were 90 minutes in length and took place once a week. Participants were given the pre-test in the

first group session and the post-test at the conclusion of the group work. The eight sessions were guided by the manual (*Revised & Updated Fighting Invisible Tigers: A Stress Management Guide for Teens* Schmitz and Hipp, 1995) and tailored based on the flow of the sessions. The eight sessions were organized as follows:

Session 1: The main objective of this session was for students to learn about the purpose and function of the group and to complete the pre-test.

Session 2: The main goals of this session were for students to recognize what stress is, what it feels like, and how it affects their lives.

Session 3: The main objective of this session was for students to understand the origins of stress, and how it affects the body (physically and emotionally). Students also learned about how and why we perceive certain situations and events as stressful.

Session 4: The purpose of this session was to relate common teen stressors and symptoms to their own situations. Also another topic of this discussion was coping and coping strategies. Students learned effective coping strategies.

Session 5: The purpose of this session was to understand how the mind can influence the stress a body feels and how one can increase awareness. The session also focused on relaxation techniques and physical activities to relieve emotional stress.

Session 6: In this session participants learned the effects of communication styles on relationships and how they affect stress and friendship levels.

Session 7: The purpose of this session was to introduce the idea of self talk. Participants identified some of the personal barriers they face in developing life-skills and worked on positive messages they can give themselves to work through these challenges. Students also examined the decisions and emotional

stresses that they may encounter in their future and how they will work through them with

Session 8: The purpose of this session was to illicit feedback from group members on the group experience, close the group and administers the post-test.

Tool

The pre-test and post-test used was the *University of Minnesota Adolescent Health Program: Measuring Emotional Stress* (from Blum & Resnick, 1986). The emotional stress section was a sub-section of the University of Minnesota Adolescent Health Survey conducted by the National Adolescent Health Resource Center in 1987. This survey was designed to measure youth

health and risk behaviors in a variety of topics. The emotional stress section of this survey has very high reliability (Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of **.87** for male students and **.90** for female students). Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were **.76** for both genders in present study.

RESULT

As the importance of group work programs for decreasing the emotional stress, we have been tried to determine the effect of social group work relieves symptoms of emotional stress among adolescent students. In this regard, correlated t-test was used for comparing the pre and post emotional stress test’s results. The results are presented in table 1.

TABLE 1: The correlated t-test of emotional stress pre and post test

Stage	Mean	SD	MD	t	df	Sig.
Pretest	49.56	3.60	3.16	5.68	59	.000
Posttest	46.40	5.02				

According to table1 the mean of pre emotional stress test is 49.56 and standard deviation is 3.60 while the mean of post emotional stress test is 46.40 and standard deviation is 5.02; and t=5.68; DF=59; p=000 that indicates significance differences in pre and post test; therefore the research hypothesis is supported.

In addition has been tried to find out the difference effect of program on male and female participations’ emotional stress. According to table 2 the mean of female emotional stress in post test is 36.54 and standard deviation is 2.60 while the mean of male emotional stress in post test is 41.25 and standard deviation is 4.02; and t=11.92; DF=58; p=000 that indicates significance differences between male and female in post test; therefore the research hypothesis is supported.

TABLE 2: The independent t-test of students’ emotional stress in post test

Gender	Mean	SD	MD	t	df	Sig.
Female	36.54	2.60	3.13	11.92	58	.000
Male	41.25	4.02				

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not social group work relieves symptoms of emotional stress in adolescents. This study also examined whether the effects of the social group work intervention differed among boys and girls.

From the results it can be inferred that both genders emotional stress levels decreased following participation in the social work group. Therefore, it appears that social group work does indeed reduce emotional stress among adolescents.

There were also some significant gender differences in the ratings after group work. Females reported a greater decrease in emotional stress levels than males at the end of the group. The authors wish to note at this point that the dynamics of the group sessions were different for the boys and girls. The girls group was made up of more quiet and shy individuals, who were focused on learning and sharing throughout the group. They took turns, listened to each other, shared similar experiences, and took in all of the information. The boys, on the other hand, were made up of more outgoing and verbal individuals. They had a difficult time taking turns, staying seated, and focusing on the material. Many of the “deeper” and more personal topics resulted in laughter from the boys and they appeared to have a hard time taking some aspects of the process seriously. This may point to both immaturity and gender role socialization. Boys are typically perceived as more immature than girls, especially at this age, and have a harder time focusing, especially in a group situation. Socially, it is more acceptable for boys to act out in this way (Santrock, 1990). Also, boys have been encouraged and socialized to express their feelings more than girls, which may be a reason why the girls seemed to get more out of the group than the boys (Washburn-Ormachea, & Hillman et al., 2004). Therefore, it would make sense that girls would get more out of the group than boys and this might explain why the females’ emotional stress levels decreased after the group on the post-test.

Limitations

Although from the results of this study one could infer that the social group work reduces emotional stress levels in both gender, there were a few limitations to the study. First, the study was done with only a small number of students (thirty boys and

thirty girls). In order to generalize the results, a larger sample size would have been better.

In order to more accurately interpret the effects of the social group work on adolescents’ emotional stress it is necessary for the intervention to be replicated with a control group that does not receive the social group work.

Implications of Study

This study provides a greater understanding of the effects of social group work on adolescent stress and the importance of examining gender issues in regard to this topic. The results of this study are important for social workers, especially those working in a school. First, from the results, one can infer that social group work reduces symptoms of stress in adolescence. Therefore, social workers can recognize the usefulness of this time effective method of group work. Teaching adolescents about stress and coping strategies can help reduce stress symptoms. Because one of the main goals of schools is to enhance the well being of young people, it is apparent that the use of stress management group work is an effective way to reach this goal. Lastly, this study emphasizes the importance for social workers to consider gender issues when developing and implementing adolescent stress programs.

Recommendations for Further Study

In order to better establish the effectiveness of the social group work approach this study needs to be replicated with a control group that does not receive the social group work intervention. Also, since all of the participants in this study were 6-8th grade students, in order to be able to generalize the results to all adolescents, it would be important to conduct this study involving other grade levels. Finally, it would also be of interest to

study the effects of social group work in adolescents who not identified as being distressed. This would be an important because of research information indicating that even minor daily hassles and short-term stressors can lead to adolescent maladjustment (Washburn-Ormachea et al, 2004).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this project was to determine whether or not social group work conducted in the school setting improves symptoms in adolescent students with emotional stress. This study also examined whether the effects of the group intervention differed among boys and girls and investigated gender differences in emotional stress reported. From the results it appears that social group work does indeed reduce emotional stress among adolescents of both genders, although some gender differences in the character of response were observed. Social group work appears to be a useful approach to reducing emotional stress among adolescent students.

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