

*Section: Preliminary studies in PPT***INVESTIGATING THE EFFECT OF A GROUP PSYCHOEDUCATION PROGRAM ON TEST ANXIETY: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BALANCE MODEL WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF POSITIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY****Tuğba Sarı**

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the effect of a Test Anxiety Group Psychoeducation Program based on the Balance Model within the context of Positive Psychotherapy on the test anxiety scores of high school students experiencing test anxiety. The experimental group consisted of 14 students, 8 females and 6 males, attending the 11th grade in a state high school in Ankara/Türkiye, who were identified by the school guidance service as experiencing test anxiety. The students in the psychoeducation group were assigned using the purposive sampling method, a non-random sampling technique and a subset of purposeful sampling. The Test Anxiety Group Psychoeducation Program was based on the Balance Model within the context of Positive Psychotherapy and consisted of 6 sessions lasting 90 minutes each, utilizing methods mainly from positive psychotherapy, drama techniques, and stories. A Test Anxiety Inventory comprising 20 items was administered to the participants. The subscale scores of Emotionality and Worry, as well as Overall Anxiety Score were utilized. A single-group, pre-test post-test experimental design was used in the research. The outcomes showed that after participating in the Test Anxiety Group Psychoeducation Program, the experimental group's test anxiety scores significantly decreased.

Keywords: positive psychotherapy, balance model, test anxiety

Introduction

Anxiety is an emotional response to environmental and psychological events that is defined by worries about the future (Öner, 1990; Erylmaz, 2010; Köknel, 1989). It is a state that is connected to many negative emotions. According to Spielberger (1972), anxiety is an unpleasant emotional state marked by tension and worry. There are several factors that might contribute to anxiety, including exposure to stressful life events, having anxious family members, having had trouble with childhood relationships with parents, teachers, or friends, as well as having medical or mental conditions (Erözkan, 2004; Erylmaz, 2012).

One of the key components influencing how a nation's society is shaped is its educational system. Primary, intermediate, and postsecondary education are the three main phases of Turkey's complicated educational system. The Higher Education Institutions Exam (YKS), an entrance exam for universities, is given at the Conclusions of high school. The choice of university that students attend is thought to be strongly influenced by YKS. These tests, which are essential for the Turkish educational system's move to higher education institutions, cause a significant amount of exam anxiety among students. Students encounter exams and deal with test-related anxiety starting at a very young age. Exam anxiety is now recognized as a distinct form of anxiety (Erözkan, 2004). According to Sarason et al. (1958), Spielberger (1972), Vogelaar et al. (2016), exam anxiety is a state of emotion characterized by cognitive, emotional, and behavioral symptoms that block a person from displaying his/her true performance in a formal exam or evaluation and increase the person's tension. Exam anxiety includes two components, worry and emotionality, according to Liebert and Morris (1970). The worry dimension is the cognitive component of exam anxiety and includes performance-related cognitive expressions of anxiety. The emotionality dimension, on the other hand, is concerned with the physiological and emotional reactions to exam anxiety, including sweating, blushing, shaking, and nausea. Exam anxiety can be useful for students up to a point because it may inspire them to do better. Beyond a certain point, adolescents might lose the ability to handle this feeling, which could have detrimental effects (Khan,

2008). Those with high anxiety interpret this arousal as a cue to work harder during the exam, even though others with average levels of anxiety have identical physiological arousal before and after the exam. As a result of their concerns, those with high levels of anxiety, on the other hand, frequently perceive this arousal negatively (Sahin et al., 2006). High levels of exam anxiety can cause students to exhibit symptoms including poor concentration, memory loss, and stomach pain as well as physical symptoms like headaches and lack of attention. Exam anxiety can have a substantial negative impact on students' performance, and as a result, on their preferences for universities and potential future careers.

Psychoeducational group interventions are an effective method to help students cope with exam anxiety and reduce their anxiety levels. These group sessions provide support and guidance to students in developing anxiety-coping skills. In Turkey, various psychoeducational programs have been implemented and studied to address exam anxiety. These programs may be based on different therapeutic approaches, with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) being the most commonly used therapeutic modalities (Bozanoğlu, 2005; Çiydem & Şavklı, 2022; Gençdoğan et al., Koruklu et al., 2006; Yıldırım & Bahayi, 2023). CBT is a widely utilized approach that focuses on identifying and modifying negative thought patterns and behaviors associated with anxiety. EMDR, on the other hand, utilizes eye movements and desensitization techniques to address distressing memories or experiences linked to anxiety. Through these psychoeducational interventions, students are equipped with practical strategies to manage exam-related stress and enhance their ability to cope with anxiety. These efforts aim to improve students' overall well-being and academic performance by fostering healthier responses to exam-related challenges.

Positive psychotherapy has been the subject of only a small number of studies, which emphasizes the need for additional research to determine its potential advantages and uses. Positive psychotherapy may help people who are anxious about exams since it places a strong emphasis on fostering a balanced model, strengths, and coping skills. It is a transcultural, humanistic, psychodynamic, and conflict-

resolution method (Peseschkian, 1986; cited in Sari, 2015). Positive psychotherapy concentrates on fostering positive views of people, understanding the influence of early life events on personality development, and assisting people in acquiring the skills required to meet their needs. Because of this, it is believed that positive psychotherapy can be useful in easing severe exam anxiety. A group psychoeducation based on the balance model of positive psychotherapy has been created in this situation. According to the basic principles of positive psychotherapy's balance model, life energy is distributed in four areas. Individuals cope with the conflicts they encounter in life and strive to achieve balance among these four dimensions: physical (through senses), achievement (through intellect), relationship (through traditions), and fantasy (through intuition) (Peseschkian, 2002). Positive psychotherapy argues that individuals can be fully healthy and productive only when they achieve balance in these four fundamental dimensions. Additionally, these four areas also represent individuals' basic needs in their daily lives. Individuals have daily physical, mental, relational, and spiritual needs. In order to fulfill these needs, individuals need to develop various life skills in each dimension. However, the balance in each individual's life may be disrupted from time to time, and individuals may find themselves not adequately meeting their daily needs, either consciously or unconsciously (Sari, 2015). Exams can present a situation that disrupts this balance, so it is believed that group psychoeducation based on the balance model may be effective in addressing exam anxiety. The aim is for students to recognize and develop the skills to meet their needs in each dimension, thus restoring the balance.

Based on the literature review, it has been determined that there are several group studies based on positive psychotherapy (Eryılmaz, 2010; Eryılmaz, 2012; Sarı, 2018; Sarı & Yıldırım, 2022). However, studies focusing on reducing exam anxiety based on positive psychotherapy are quite limited (Sarı & Taşlıçukur, 2018). This experimental research has been conducted to address this gap in the existing literature and demonstrate the effectiveness of interventions using positive psychotherapy in reducing exam anxiety and provide guidance for future studies. Thus, the aim of this experimental study is to examine the effectiveness of a group psychoeducation program based on the Balance

Model in the context of Positive Psychotherapy on high school students' exam anxiety scores. The hypothesis of this experimental study is that when the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group are examined, there will be a significant decrease in exam anxiety scores.

Methodology

2.1. Model of Research

In this study, a single-group pre-test, post-test quasi-experimental design was used to examine the impact of a group psychological counseling program based on the balance model within the context of positive psychotherapy on secondary school students who are currently experiencing exam anxiety.

2.2. Participants

The study's experimental group consisted of a total of 14 senior students, comprising 8 females and 6 males, who are enrolled in a large public high school in Ankara. Students who felt extremely stressed out about the Higher Education Entrance Exam (YKS) applied to the program after the school counselor announced that a group study on managing test anxiety would begin. These individuals scored highly on tests of test anxiety, according to preliminary evaluations conducted using a standardized scale. All of these students were consequently added to the group study. In this study, the participants in the experimental group were assigned using non-random purposive sampling, which is a subset of the purposeful sampling method, to select individuals who meet specific criteria for the study.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

The Exam Anxiety Inventory: The adaptation of the inventory developed by Spielberger into Turkish was carried out by Öner (1990). The Exam Anxiety Inventory (EAI) is a four-point Likert-type questionnaire consisting of 20 items. Through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, the EAI was found to have two sub-dimensions: Worry (EAI-W) and Emotionality (EAI-E). The Total Exam Anxiety Score (EAI-T) is obtained by summing the scores of the two subscales, representing the two main dimensions of exam anxiety. As all three scores (Worry, Emotionality, and Total Exam Anxiety) increase, the level of anxiety, worry, and emotionality also increases (Öner, 1990). In this

study, the Worry score, Emotionality score, and Total Exam Anxiety score obtained from the study group were all evaluated.

2.4. Experimental Procedure

The exam anxiety group psychoeducation program based on the balance model within the context of positive psychotherapy consists of 6 sessions, each lasting an average of 90 minutes. Due to the extended duration of each session, the program was conducted outside of school hours. Prior to the commencement of the study, permission forms from the families of the students in the experimental group were obtained.

For the study, the library hall of Çankaya Anatolian High School was selected for this program because it is equipped with the necessary technical facilities. Necessary preparations, such as setting up the session arrangement, were made for the study. A whiteboard, pens, computers, a projector, colored pens, paper, cardboard, strings, and other supplies were all set up and ready to use.

The psychoeducation program was developed using the balance model and three positive psychotherapy principles (hope, balance, and consultation). It was built on the theoretical foundations of positive psychotherapy.

Each session started with a warm-up activity. Each session also included the use of a proverb or story. Participants in these sessions engaged in exercises and activities intended to foster optimistic feelings, boosting resilience, creating coping mechanisms, and strengthening psychological functioning. While theatre techniques and storytelling offered chances for self-expression and the investigation of personal histories, the incorporation of cognitive-behavioral approaches allowed for the discovery and adjustment of negative ideas and beliefs. The specifics of what was accomplished in each session are listed below. The program is summarized in Table 1. Each session started with a warm-up activity. Each session also included the use of a proverb or story. Participants in these sessions engaged in exercises and activities intended at fostering optimistic feelings, boosting resilience, creating coping mechanisms, and strengthening psychological functioning. While theatre techniques and storytelling offered chances for self-expression and the investigation of personal histories, the

incorporation of cognitive-behavioral approaches allowed for the discovery and adjustment of negative ideas and beliefs. The specifics of what was accomplished in each session are listed below, as summarized in Table 1.

In the first session, the group facilitator informed members about the program and provided positive psychotherapy within the framework of the balance model. Warm-up exercises were carried out to enable participants to get to know one another and feel at ease with the group process. Group rules were formed, written on cardboard, and posted in an accessible spot after taking into consideration the recommendations from the participants. On colorful post-it notes, participants were asked to list what they expected from the program. There were definitions given for anxiety and exam anxiety. The group leader discussed the causes of exam anxiety and its effects on people. The participants were asked to discuss any effects they have noticed in themselves. On tiny pieces of paper, they responded, and those papers were pinned on a bulletin board.

In the second session, the "Two Frogs" story was read, and the story was discussed with the participants. Then, the balance model in Positive Psychotherapy was explained, and each dimension was thoroughly discussed. Based on this information, the group members were asked to draw their own balance models and were instructed to keep them until the end of the group sessions.

In the third session, the participants were reminded of the balance model, and they shared their experiences regarding what happens in their bodies when they experience anxiety. The responses were written in the "body" section of the balance model chart on the whiteboard. After noting down the responses, the group members were asked about their views on coping strategies for dealing with such challenging situations. Then, techniques for controlling the body (such as proper breathing and achieving relaxation) were explained. The "Safe Place" exercise was conducted during the session.

In the fourth session, the "Treasure of Knowledge" story was read, and the story was discussed with the participants. They were reminded of the balance model, and questions were asked about how their performance area is affected when they experience anxiety. The

responses were written in the "success/performance" section of the balance model chart on the whiteboard. The group discussed the effects of anxiety on the performance area. Participants were then asked to set goals related to their performance areas for the next 1 week, 1 month, 3 months, 6 months, 1 year, and 5 years and to make plans on how to achieve those goals. They were instructed to hang the papers with their plans in a place where they can see them regularly in their rooms.

In the fifth session, the participants were reminded of the balance model, and they were asked questions about how their "relationship" area is affected when they experience anxiety. The responses were written in the "relationship" section of the balance model chart on the whiteboard. The group discussed the effects of anxiety on the relationship area. Brainstorming was done on how to cope with the negative effects. Communication and communication barriers were explained. The "Love Bombardment" exercise was conducted, and participants shared their experiences during the activity.

In the sixth and final session the participants were asked to consider how anxiety impacts the

"future/spirituality" aspect of the balance model. The answers were noted in the balance model chart's "future/spirituality" section on the whiteboard. The group talked about coping mechanisms for anxiety's detrimental effects on spirituality and the future. Participants were given a metaphorical lens through which to view and examine many facets of their own lives, such as their dreams, goals, and spiritual beliefs, after the story "Dreams" was read. After that, participants were instructed to look over the balance model they had created at the start and maintained throughout the course of the program. Participants were invited to record any shifts in their viewpoints or experiences in relation to the four areas of the balance model in writing. In addition, the fourth session's goal-setting and planning exercise for the performance area was expanded to cover all four areas of the balance model, enabling participants to plan and set objectives for every facet of their lives in order to attain a sense of overall balance and wellbeing. In the first session, they wrote expectations on post-it notes, which they then evaluated. The program was finished, and the last test was given.

Table 1.

Exam Anxiety Group Psychoeducation Program Based on Positive Psychotherapy

Session	Aim	Technique
1-Introduction	Introduction involves introducing the participants to the process, establishing group rules, and providing information about exam anxiety.	Warm-up exercise
2-Introduction of the Balance Mode	Introducing the balance model according to Positive Psychotherapy and having the participants draw their balance models. Visualizing and conceptualizing their own balance in different life areas, fostering self-awareness and understanding of how different aspects of their lives interact and influence each other.	Warm-up exercise <i>Two Frogs Story</i> * Balance model Relaxation exercise
3-Physical Dimension	Exploring physical responses to anxiety, introducing coping strategies, and incorporating relaxation exercises to support the participants in managing their test anxiety effectively.	Warm-up exercise Proper breathing exercise Relaxation exercise Safe place visualization exercise
4-Achievement Dimension	Recognizing the effects of exam anxiety on the achievement area and developing the skills in this area by identifying and improving their abilities such as goal-setting, and planning, empowering the participants to work towards their desired achievements and personal growth while managing their test anxiety.	Warm-up exercise <i>Treasure of Knowledge Story</i> * Developing realistic thoughts exercise Goal-setting exercise
5-Relationship Dimension	Exploring the effects of anxiety on relationships, identifying coping strategies, and facilitating effective communication and interpersonal support among the participants.	Warm-up exercise Sharing information about communication

		and communication barriers Love Bombardment exercise
6- Future/ Spiritual Dimension	Developing the ability to recognize and cope with reactions in the area of future/spirituality when experiencing anxiety. Self-reflection, goal-setting, and evaluation of personal growth and development across all aspects of the balance model.	Warm-up exercise <i>Dreams and Aspirations Story*</i> Future balance model

*The stories can be accessed from Prof. Dr. Peseschkian's book "Positive Psychotherapy in Everyday Life" (2016).

2.5. Data Analysis

In the study, non-parametric tests were used for data analysis due to the number of participants. The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was used to compare the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group. A significance level of 0.05 was accepted to interpret the results of the statistical analysis.

Results

The descriptive statistical findings of pretest and posttest scale applications on the experimental group students are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Descriptive Statistical Findings of Pretest and Posttest Scale Applications on Students in the Experimental Group

Inventories	Experimental Group	N	Mean	Min.	Max.
Emotionality	Pre-test	14	36,78	6,13	23
	Post-test	14	24,64	4,20	16
Worry	Pre-test	14	22,28	4,10	16
	Post-test	14	15,64	4,22	10
Overall	Pre-test	14	59,28	9,71	39
	Post-test	14	40,28	7,90	28

The mean pretest scores of the students in the psychoeducation group for the Emotionality subscale were 36.78, while the posttest scores were 24.64. For the Worry subscale, the mean pretest scores were 22.28, and the posttest scores were 15.64. Regarding the total Test Anxiety scale, the average pretest scores were 59.28, and the posttest scores were 40.28.

The comparison of the exam anxiety pretest and posttest scores for the participants who took part in the positive psychotherapy-based exam anxiety coping study was conducted using the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test for the experimental group's pretest and posttest scores, and the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3.
Results of the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test applied to the pretest and posttest scores of the experimental group

Test Anxiety	Pre-Post Test	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	z	p
Total Score (EAI-T)	Negative Rank	12	8,50	102	-3,111	,002*
	Positive Rank	2	1,50	3		
	Equal	0				
Worry (EAI-W)	Negative Rank	12	8,50	102	-3,111	,002*
	Positive Rank	2	1,50	3		
	Equal	0				
Emotional (EAI-E)	Negative Rank	12	8,50	102	-3,111	,002*
	Positive Rank	2	1,50	3		
	Equal	0				

*p<0,05

Upon analyzing Table 3, it is evident that there are significant differences in the worry and emotionality subscales, as well as the total score of exam anxiety, between the pre-test and post-test measurements of the participants in the experimental group who took part in the positive psychotherapy-based exam anxiety coping study (Total Score $z=-3.112$, $p<0.01$). A closer examination of these differences reveals that both worry and emotionality subscale scores showed a significant decrease in the post-test. This finding supports the effectiveness of the positive psychotherapy-based exam anxiety coping program, which spanned six sessions, and confirms the acceptance of the hypothesis.

Discussion

In this study examining the effectiveness of a positive psychotherapy-based exam anxiety coping group psychoeducation program on high school students' exam anxiety scores, significant differences were found in the pre-test and post-test total exam anxiety scores, as well as in the emotionality and worry subscale scores of the participants in the experimental group who participated in the positive psychotherapy-based exam anxiety coping program. A decrease in exam anxiety was observed in the post-test. These findings demonstrate that the positive psychotherapy-based exam anxiety coping group psychoeducation program is effective in reducing both the emotional and cognitive aspects of exam anxiety in high school students.

When the literature is examined, it is observed that there is a limited number of studies conducted in the context of positive psychotherapy aiming to reduce test anxiety. In the only study identified so far, Sarı and Taşlıçukur (2018) examined the effectiveness of the Positive Psychotherapy-based test anxiety group counseling program on middle school students. The findings indicate that the test anxiety program was significantly effective on the test anxiety of the participating students, and the implemented program can be considered as a viable intervention for reducing test anxiety in adolescents.

Even though there aren't many studies that address test anxiety in the context of positive psychotherapy, it's evident that different psychoeducation group interventions have been conducted within the positive psychotherapy framework on various topics. Eryılmaz (2010), for instance, claimed that she could implement

her "Program for Expanding Goals for Adolescents in the Context of Positive Psychotherapy and Developmental Counseling" in schools. Eryılmaz (2012) conducted an examination of the efficacy of the "Expanding Goals for Adolescents Group Guidance Program" within the framework of positive psychotherapy. The results indicated that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups with respect to the acquisition of lifelong goals and increased life satisfaction. Furthermore, Sarı and Yıldırım (2022) examined the impact of gratitude diary writing, utilizing the balance model, on the level of subjective well-being and gratitude among secondary school students. Their findings indicated that writing a gratitude diary elevated the levels of both these constructs among teenagers. The positive outcomes of these experimental investigations that emphasize positive emotions and positive psychotherapy confirm the conclusions of our investigation.

The findings of our study align with the holistic approach of positive psychotherapy, which takes into account the body, relationships, thoughts, hope, and spirituality (Eryılmaz, 2017). It is believed that this all-encompassing strategy was crucial in producing successful outcomes for the current investigation. It is known that test anxiety has important cognitive, relational, physical, and origins and effects. By using the comprehensive balance model of positive psychotherapy, the program utilized in this study effectively addressed the various aspects of test anxiety and gave participants skills and knowledge to cope with anxiety in different ways.

For instance, the balance model's body-oriented exercises, like correct breathing and relaxation methods, can help reduce test anxiety. By influencing stress hormone levels and encouraging the release of endorphins, which are chemicals associated with happiness and wellbeing, these exercises can lessen test anxiety (Erözkan, 2004). With the aid of these exercises, test anxiety can be decreased by instilling feelings of comfort and tranquility. Participants also acknowledged the importance of exercise and self-care. Regular exercisers frequently express feeling more confident and physically better (Polat et al., 2020). Anxiety related to exams may diminish due to heightened self-assurance and self-efficacy, as individuals may perceive themselves as more capable and

equipped to manage demanding circumstances like examinations. People who suffer from test anxiety may hold unfavorable beliefs about failing in the context of exams in the achievement domain. Test anxiety can be effectively decreased by adopting positive thoughts and beliefs (Öner, 1990). Additionally, test-anxious people may frequently feel helpless or inadequate. Individuals are encouraged to highlight and concentrate on their unique strengths through positive psychotherapy and the balance model (Eryılmaz, 2020; Peseschkian, 2015). This method can help people feel more confident in themselves, which will make it easier for them to deal with test anxiety (Sarı, 2015).

When one considers the relationship domain, one can see how communication and relationship skills enable people to interact more effectively with their social surroundings. Being able to communicate effectively can help one feel more understood and supported by others, which is beneficial during exam season when people are more stressed and anxious. One of the most important things in managing test anxiety is having a strong social support system. Good relationships with teachers, family, and close friends may result in increased understanding and support for exam-taking individuals (Yıldırım & Bahayi, 2023). This may lessen test-related anxiety. Regarding the final domain of the balance model, which is future/spirituality, spirituality can enhance people's perception of their life's meaning and purpose (Karslı, 2019). This sense of direction and meaning can serve as a driving force behind study sessions and provide comfort to individuals experiencing exam anxiety. People can find a sense of purpose and the willpower to overcome exam-related obstacles when they connect their studies to a greater purpose.

Furthermore, by discussing their fears in the framework of the balance model, students who were feeling severe test anxiety were given the chance to view themselves holistically. Students developed a better awareness of the many aspects of their lives that had been influenced by test anxiety by talking about their feelings and difficulties within the balance model. This holistic perspective likely enabled them to recognize the interconnectedness of different aspects of their lives and how these dimensions influence each other, including how test anxiety can spill over into other areas. Through the

stories shared, they also had the chance to gain a new perspective, perhaps realizing that they are not alone in their struggles and that others have overcome similar challenges. Furthermore, they created specific roadmaps for each dimension of the balance model. Many of them reported implementing concrete steps they developed into their daily lives. It is believed that this holistic daily life organization helped students in balancing their intense anxiety.

Suggestions

In this study, the Positive Psychotherapy-based Balance Model Group Psychoeducation Program for test anxiety was conducted with 14 11th-grade students identified as having high test anxiety. The program was found to be effective in reducing students' test anxiety scores. However, the study has some limitations in terms of its sample. Future studies can strengthen the experimental design by including a control group. Additionally, the Positive Psychotherapy-based Balance Model Group Psychoeducation Program can be applied to various samples, including different school types (e.g., elementary, middle, high schools), different age groups (e.g., children, adolescents, adults), and groups with varying sample sizes (e.g., small or large groups).

Despite its limitations, the study contributes valuable insights to the field of positive psychotherapy and offers practical applications for supporting students' well-being during times of anxiety and stress. School psychologists and counselors can organize similar positive psychotherapy-based interventions and provide support to students in coping with anxiety during challenging times.

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