

The Effectiveness of Positive Therapy on Fear of Intimacy and Suicidal Thoughts in Girls Experiencing Romantic Relationship Dissolution

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to determine the effectiveness of positive therapy on fear of intimacy and suicidal thoughts in girls experiencing romantic relationship dissolution.

Methods: This semi-experimental study employed a pretest-posttest-follow-up design with a control group. The statistical population included 401 individuals who visited a counseling center in Tehran. From this population, 30 girls experiencing romantic relationship dissolution were selected based on inclusion and exclusion criteria and were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups, each consisting of 15 individuals. Data were collected using the Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire and the Fear of Intimacy Scale. The experimental group received 8 sessions of positive therapy, while the control group received no intervention. Data were analyzed using repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with SPSS.24 software.

Findings: The results showed that positive therapy had a significant effect on reducing fear of intimacy ($F=24.87$, $P<0.001$) and suicidal thoughts ($F=19.87$, $P<0.001$) in girls experiencing romantic relationship dissolution.

Conclusion: It can be concluded that positive therapy leads to a reduction in fear of intimacy and suicidal thoughts in girls experiencing romantic relationship dissolution and can be effective in reducing psychological problems in this population.

Keywords: Positive Therapy, Suicidal Thoughts, Fear of Intimacy, Romantic Relationship Dissolution.

1. Introduction

In late adolescence and early adulthood, individuals encounter several significant social variables that lead to the adoption of new social roles (Salter, 2019). The positive outcomes of romantic relationships can lead to the formation

of a family and a successful marriage, thereby increasing self-esteem (Chalker et al., 2022). Romantic relationships are critical because research shows they impact a wide range of personality outcomes and mental health (Still, 2020). Conversely, they can lead to negative outcomes such as

excessive trust-seeking (Love & Durtschi, 2021; Love et al., 2021), failure in life through loss of self-esteem (May et al., 2019), and a sense of failure (Love & Durtschi, 2021).

Relationship dissolution involves a unique process wherein individuals begin to alter their interpretations and personal constructs regarding growth and the meaning of past experiences, gaining new meanings from previous experiences or obtaining new experiences (Rajabi VandeChali et al., 2022). Undoubtedly, the dissolution of a romantic relationship is a highly distressing and stressful experience, often accompanied by grief, depression, loneliness (Love et al., 2018), and changes in quality of life. Even memories of the partner can cause stress and depression. Concerns about romantic relationships are among the most common reasons young people seek counseling (Orsolini et al., 2022).

Romantic relationships impact psychosocial development and mental health during adolescence. For example, frequent or early dating and meeting multiple partners are associated with behavioral issues, poorer academic performance, and employment prospects (Love et al., 2018), and increased delinquency (Love et al., 2017). Similarly, several studies have shown that stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms are higher among adolescents engaged in romantic experiences compared to those who are not.

Lloyd (2011) first discussed the concept of fear of intimacy, identifying essential aspects of this fear present to some extent in everyone. He argued that fundamental reasons for the fear of intimacy include fear of confrontation, fear of abandonment, fear of emotional attacks, fear of losing control, fear of one's destructive impulses, and fear of losing individuality by becoming submerged in another. Fear of confrontation involves the risk of information discovered about a partner that might cause embarrassment. Fear of abandonment is the concern that a partner will leave once they know too much about the person. Fear of emotional attacks is the reluctance to disclose information that might be used against them (Lloyd, 2011). The risk of intimacy can be too great if it involves the fear of losing individual control (Manbeck et al., 2020). Fear of one's destructive impulses relates to the fear of expressing emotions excessively, leading to crying or killing emotions. Finally, it includes the fear of losing oneself or being completely merged with another (Scigala et al., 2021). Thus, examining this crucial variable is essential for better understanding dissolved relationships or starting new ones.

Suicide is a significant mental health issue. According to the 2019 World Health Organization report, at least 500,000

people worldwide end their lives by suicide each year. Suicide studies examine important phenomena, including suicidal thoughts and attempts (Chalker et al., 2022). Suicidal thoughts refer to any self-destructive ideation, ranging from vague thoughts about ending one's life to actual suicide attempts. The annual prevalence of suicidal thoughts in adults is reported to be between 2.3% and 5.6% (Macalli et al., 2021). Twenty-four percent of individuals reporting suicidal thoughts eventually attempt suicide, making suicidal thoughts a risk factor for suicide. Recent epidemiological studies show a significant increase in suicide attempts among adolescents, with a prevalence of 3.5% to 11% among high school students (Pramukti et al., 2020). Most research indicates that ages 15 to 24 are high-risk for suicide attempts. In Iran, like many other countries, the suicide rate has considerably increased in recent decades. Suicidal thoughts are closely related to unconventional stress responses such as alcohol and drug use, conflicts with parents, running away from home, pessimism about the future, and emotional problems (breakups) (Chalker et al., 2022; Salter, 2019; Still, 2020). Suicide victims often experience significant family and emotional pressures, such as parental divorce or romantic relationship breakups (Rajabi VandeChali et al., 2022). Relationship dissolution among single individuals is twice as likely as among married individuals, and suicide rates among single individuals are also twice as high. Thus, it can be concluded that relationship dissolution can be more dangerous for single individuals and those at younger ages (Alejos et al., 2023).

To date, methods to help improve the conditions of romantic relationship dissolution have been employed. Researchers have found that group logotherapy increases self-esteem and psychological well-being in female students with love trauma syndrome (Behdost et al., 2019). In another study, spiritual-religious psychotherapy was used to reduce the effects of love trauma syndrome and acceptance in female students experiencing romantic relationship dissolution, which reduced syndrome symptoms (Behdost et al., 2019). Additionally, another study concluded that group reality therapy improved love trauma syndrome and overall functioning in individuals who had experienced emotional failure (Tavasoli et al., 2018). However, positive therapy has been less commonly used. Positive psychology emphasizes enhancing human capabilities and virtues, enabling individuals and communities to achieve success (Javidan & ASLANI, 2018). Positive psychology interventions are a relatively new and potentially promising approach to increasing positive psychological constructs in psychology,

such as optimism and the impact of positive emotions on various health outcomes (Darbani & Parsakia, 2023; Rashid, 2015). At the mental level, it focuses on valuable mental experiences such as well-being, satisfaction, hope, and optimism, and at the individual level, it emphasizes positive traits such as the capacity for work and love, courage, perseverance, forgiveness, and foresight. At the group level, it promotes responsibility, altruism, and tolerance (Magyar-Moe, 2009). Positive psychotherapy increases happiness, positive feelings, meaningful and committed living, psychological well-being, and hope (Seligman et al., 2009). Moreover, positive psychotherapy is empirically validated. Reviewing the literature on positive psychology indicates the potential applications of this approach for various individuals, and its effectiveness has been confirmed in multiple studies. For instance, positive psychotherapy has been shown to reduce depression and increase self-esteem and hope in women with breast cancer (Ghorbani et al., 2017). Based on these points and considering the adverse outcomes of romantic relationship dissolution, a therapeutic approach is needed to reduce these symptoms and help individuals decrease self-destructive behaviors and increase well-being. This research aims to use positive therapy on students, one of the country's vulnerable groups. Therefore, the present study aims to determine the effectiveness of positive therapy on suicidal thoughts and fear of intimacy in students experiencing romantic relationship dissolution.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and Participant

The present study is a semi-experimental pretest-posttest follow-up design with a control group. The statistical population of this study included all girls experiencing romantic relationship dissolution who visited counseling centers in districts 13, 14, and 15 of Tehran in 2022, totaling 401 individuals. To select a statistical sample, a workshop advertisement was announced. From the applicants, 30 eligible girls with scores below the average on the Ross Questionnaire for romantic relationship dissolution, self-injury, and low scores on suicidal thoughts were selected using convenience sampling and randomly assigned to experimental and control groups, each with 15 individuals. Ethical considerations included voluntary participation, familiarizing participants with the study's details and regulations, respecting participants' views and beliefs, allowing group members to withdraw at any stage, and providing the control group with the intervention after the

study. All records and questionnaires were confidential, and informed consent was obtained from all volunteers. Descriptive data analysis involved calculating statistical indicators for each research variable. Inferential statistics included repeated measures ANOVA using SPSS-22 software.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Fear of Intimacy

This questionnaire, first developed by Descutner and Thelen (1991), measures anxiety related to close relationships, whether or not individuals are engaged in a romantic relationship. It reveals fear levels in a wide range of interpersonal situations and relationships. The scale consists of 35 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all like me) to 5 (very much like me), with a minimum score of 35 and a maximum of 175. Scores between 35 and 70 indicate low fear of intimacy, scores between 70 and 105 indicate moderate fear of intimacy, and scores above 105 indicate high fear of intimacy. Higher scores suggest multiple intimacy problems and lower satisfaction with romantic relationships. Descutner and Thelen (1991) used construct validity and discriminant validity to determine the scale's reliability and validity, finding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.93 and test-retest reliability of 0.89. The reliability of this tool, measured by Cronbach's alpha, was 0.89 (Hamidikian et al., 2023).

2.2.2. Suicide Ideation

Developed by Aaron Beck in 1961, this scale includes 19 items assessing wishes for death, active and passive suicidal desire, the duration and frequency of suicidal thoughts, perceived control, deterrent factors, and readiness to attempt suicide. It contains five screening questions; if responses indicate active or passive suicidal desire, the remaining 14 items are completed. The BSSI combines three factors: death wish, suicide preparation, and actual suicide desire. Suicidal ideation is categorized as no suicidal thoughts (score 0-3), low suicidal thoughts (score 4-11), and high-risk suicidal thoughts (score 12 or more). Kikhavoni et al. (2013) found Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.87 to 0.97, and test-retest reliability of 0.54. The reliability, measured by Cronbach's alpha, was 0.89 (Khandaghi Khameneh et al., 2023).

2.3. Intervention

2.3.1. Positive Psychotherapy

The intervention, based on positive psychotherapy by Seligman and Rashid (2006), was conducted in eight 90-minute weekly sessions over two months (Ghorbani et al., 2017; Javidan & ASLANI, 2018).

Session 1: Introduction and Building Rapport

In the first session, the focus is on establishing a trusting and open environment. The therapist introduces the concept of positive therapy, its goals, and the structure of the upcoming sessions. Participants share their experiences and expectations, fostering a sense of community and mutual support. This session also involves initial assessments and setting personal goals for therapy.

Session 2: Identifying Strengths

The second session is dedicated to helping participants recognize and appreciate their personal strengths and virtues. Through various exercises and discussions, individuals identify their core strengths and how these can be leveraged to improve their overall well-being. This session aims to shift the focus from problems to potentials.

Session 3: Cultivating Positive Emotions

In this session, participants learn techniques to enhance positive emotions in their daily lives. Activities may include gratitude journaling, savoring positive experiences, and practicing mindfulness. The goal is to help participants develop a more positive outlook and increase their daily experiences of joy and contentment.

Session 4: Building Optimism and Hope

The fourth session focuses on fostering a sense of optimism and hope for the future. Participants engage in exercises designed to challenge negative thinking patterns and replace them with more positive and realistic thoughts. Techniques such as imagining a positive future and setting achievable goals are emphasized.

Session 5: Enhancing Resilience

This session is centered on building resilience and coping strategies to handle life's challenges. Participants discuss

past experiences of overcoming adversity and identify factors that contributed to their resilience. The session includes exercises on problem-solving and developing a growth mindset.

Session 6: Fostering Meaning and Purpose

In the sixth session, the emphasis is on finding and fostering meaning and purpose in life. Participants explore what gives their lives meaning and how they can pursue activities and goals that align with their values and passions. This session often involves creating a personal mission statement.

Session 7: Developing Positive Relationships

This session focuses on the importance of positive relationships and how to nurture them. Participants learn skills for effective communication, empathy, and conflict resolution. The aim is to enhance their social support networks and improve the quality of their interactions with others.

Session 8: Consolidation and Future Planning

The final session involves consolidating the skills and insights gained throughout the therapy. Participants reflect on their progress, revisit their initial goals, and plan how to maintain and build on their gains. The session concludes with a discussion on strategies for continuing personal growth and well-being beyond the therapy sessions.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with SPSS.24 software.

3. Findings and Results

The mean age (standard deviation) of all participants was 16.27 (0.785), with the experimental group having a mean age (standard deviation) of 16.145 (0.698) and the control group 16.98 (0.701). The minimum and maximum ages were 16 and 18, respectively. All participants lacked academic degrees and were high school students. Additionally, all participants were studying full-time.

Table 1

Mean (Standard Deviation) Scores of Fear of Intimacy and Suicidal Thoughts by Experimental and Control Groups

Variable	Group	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Follow-up Mean (SD)
Fear of Intimacy	Experimental	116.53 (9.57)	73.66 (8.39)	69.66 (8.30)
	Control	112.13 (10.07)	111.93 (10.01)	111.99 (10.42)
Suicidal Thoughts	Experimental	19.60 (3.93)	8.80 (2.00)	8.66 (1.95)
	Control	18.80 (3.26)	19.80 (3.30)	19.26 (3.16)

Before data analysis, the underlying assumptions of covariance analysis were examined. The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test confirmed the assumption of homogeneity of variances for the variables of fear of intimacy and suicidal thoughts. The Levene's test for equality of variances showed that the variances of fear of intimacy and suicidal thoughts

in the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up stages were equal across the experimental and control groups. Additionally, the results of Mauchly's test of sphericity indicated a violation of the sphericity assumption ($p = .001$), requiring the use of the Greenhouse-Geisser correction.

Table 2

Repeated Measures ANOVA for Comparing Pre-test, Post-test, and Follow-up on Psychological Distress and Intolerance of Uncertainty in Experimental and Control Groups

Scale	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta Squared
Fear of Intimacy	Time	467.289	1.245	375.207	109.672	.001	.73
	Time * Group	461.067	1.396	370.211	118.589	.001	.64
	Group	939.254	1	939.254	24.874	.001	.44
Suicidal Thoughts	Time	589.895	1.285	458.590	98.985	.001	.69
	Time * Group	561.287	1.285	436.799	104.895	.001	.78
	Group	185.289	1	185.289	19.875	.001	.20

The results in Table 2 indicate that the ANOVA for both within-group (time) and between-group effects is significant. These results suggest that the effect of time is significant when considering the group effect. Additionally,

the interaction between group and time is significant, so the Bonferroni post-hoc test was used for pairwise comparisons of the groups.

Table 3

Bonferroni Post-hoc Test Results for Comparing Fear of Intimacy and Suicidal Thoughts in the Experimental Group

Variable	Stages	Post-test Mean Difference	Follow-up Mean Difference
Fear of Intimacy	Pre-test	42.78*	46.87*
	Post-test	-	4.00
Suicidal Thoughts	Pre-test	6.00*	5.18*
	Post-test	-	-0.82

The results in Table 3 for the intervention group comparisons showed significant differences between pre-test and post-test and pre-test and follow-up stages in reducing fear of intimacy, indicating that scores decreased from the pre-test to the follow-up stage. However, there was no difference between the post-test and follow-up stages in reducing fear of intimacy. Similarly, significant differences were found between pre-test and post-test and pre-test and follow-up stages in reducing suicidal thoughts, indicating that scores decreased from the pre-test to the follow-up stage. There was no difference between the post-test and follow-up stages in reducing suicidal thoughts. There is an interaction between the groups and the three intervention stages in reducing suicidal thoughts ($p < .001$).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to determine the effectiveness of positive therapy on suicidal thoughts and fear of intimacy in girls experiencing romantic relationship dissolution. The findings showed significant differences between the positive therapy group and the control group regarding fear of intimacy, indicating that positive therapy reduced fear of intimacy in the experimental group compared to the control group. This finding aligns with Ghorbani et al.'s (2017) study on the impact of positive psychotherapy on reducing depression, increasing self-esteem, and increasing hope in women with breast cancer (Ghorbani et al., 2017).

Fear of intimacy refers to the inhibited ability to exchange significant personal thoughts and feelings with others due to anxiety. Individuals who received positive psychotherapy can free themselves from dysfunctional thoughts that cause

negative emotions like anxiety and adopt more positive and effective thoughts about themselves and the world around them, thereby reducing fear of intimacy. Researchers have also stated that positive psychological education can prepare the mind for choosing appropriate and creative ways to achieve goals and solve problems. Self-awareness, a component reinforced through positive education, and the development of purpose and meaning in life are foundations of positive psychology emphasized in this therapy (Seligman et al., 2009). Thus, it can be considered that girls who received positive therapy could have happier lives with greater self-awareness, meaning and purpose in life, and problem-solving abilities, resulting in less anxiety and fear of romantic or intimate relationships. They effectively cope with psychological pressures using strategies like reassessment and problem-solving and actively avoid past events that cause anxiety while building better social support networks around themselves. Therefore, girls who have benefited from positive therapy can reduce their fear of intimacy through increased coping ability, higher optimism, and reduced depression and anxiety. Individuals who receive positive education have a positive outlook on their abilities and focus on positive events instead of failures and past unpleasant events. These individuals attribute their successes and achievements to their abilities. They rely on their inner resources in difficult life situations and activate positive and constructive coping mechanisms when facing problems. Positively-oriented individuals have an internal locus of control and maintain close relationships with God and spiritual resources, with high levels of self-esteem and self-worth.

The results also showed that positive psychotherapy significantly impacts suicidal thoughts in girls. This finding indicates that positive therapy reduced suicidal thoughts in the experimental group compared to the control group, a topic that has not been previously studied. According to Pictet's (2011) theory, the cyclical impact of positive and negative emotions on feelings explains the effect of this approach and how happiness and depression (leading to suicide) are created (Pictet, 2014; Pictet et al., 2011). Depressed individuals increase their distress and restlessness by generating negative emotions and blocking positive ones, ultimately entering a tunnel process (where an individual is stuck in a specific perspective and cannot easily escape, leading to severe depression and suicide) (Pictet et al., 2011). It seems logical that in this study, girls were trapped in a problematic tunnel process, finding it difficult to escape and harboring suicidal thoughts. Therefore, changing their

perspective on the world and their abilities, striving to discover their positive abilities and capabilities, focusing on positive aspects of life, and reframing and changing their views on negative aspects led to reduced distress, depression, suicide, and increased happiness. The attention bias process can be attributed to research in this field and this study in explaining the creation of happiness. Attention bias is a phenomenon where attention channels, despite the individual's efforts to ignore them, direct the individual toward emotionally significant stimuli (Pictet, 2014).

5. Suggestions and Limitations

The study results may not be generalizable to other populations as it was limited to girls experiencing romantic relationship dissolution. It is suggested that this study be conducted on male groups, as different genders have different personality traits and instincts. Understanding these differences can lead to faster preventive measures in case of problems. It is also recommended that this study be repeated in other provinces, as the results may vary. Additionally, other methods, such as interviews with psychology professors, patient counseling, and treatment center officials, should be used to collect data, as there may be personal biases in respondents' questionnaire responses.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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