

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EXPRESSIVE THERAPY IN REDUCING ANXIETY IN EARLY ADULTHOOD

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Abstract

Coming into adulthood presents challenges as individuals are expected to release their reliance on their parents and put their best effort into standing on their own. Adults often face various challenges that necessitate their ability to adjust to changes. Any problems in early adulthood can cause anxiety. Anxiety without proper treatment can be one of the obstacles to living life, both physically and mentally. The purpose of this research is to find out the effectiveness of expressive therapy in reducing anxiety. The subjects in this study were five early adult males ranging from 20 to 28 years old and with moderate to high anxiety categories. Data collection techniques included observation, focus group discussion, and the Beck Anxiety Inventory scale (BAI). Anxiety experienced by subjects is about careers, success, and relationships with the opposite sex. The research method used is experimental research with a research design of one group pre- and post-test without a control group—subject determination technique using purposive sampling. Data analysis in this study used quantitative analysis to see differences between pre-test and post-test with parametric tests using Wilcoxon tests. Data analysis results showed significant differences in anxiety before and after expressive therapy, with a $Z=-2,023$ value and a significance of $p=0,043$ ($p<0,05$). The conclusion of this study is that expressive therapy is effective in reducing anxiety in early adults.

Keywords: Expressive Therapy, Anxiety, Early Adulthood.

1. Introduction

The developmental span in humans consists of several stages, one of which is adulthood. In the Developmental Psychology study, the Adulthood stage is divided into three stages: early, middle, and late adulthood. The transition period from adolescence to adulthood, often referred to as emerging adulthood, occurs when individuals are between 18-25 years old (Arnett, 2014). Adulthood represents the peak stage of health development, physical fitness, and the potential for highly positive development compared to adolescence. However, it also poses challenges, as individuals are expected to break free from dependence on their parents and strive to stand independently.

Early adulthood offers significant opportunities for self-exploration but also presents significant challenges (Halfon et al., 2017). Individuals in early adulthood are considered capable of shaping their future and managing their lives independently (Wardhani, 2002). Generally, individuals in adulthood have several goals, including meeting basic needs, striving for a better quality of life, finding employment, and pursuing education or marriage. Specific to adults, one is likely to encounter various

issues that demand adaptation, active participation in society, socialization, adherence to norms and rules, marital status, sexual orientation, and various social demands that ultimately lead to recognition and self-actualization. One of the developmental tasks of early adulthood is facing the social world. Indeed, as individuals approach adulthood, they are bombarded with questions from society, such as when they will graduate, get married, find a job, and so on. The first question that often arises is when individuals heading to the end of their studies will graduate. These questions pressure individuals transitioning into adulthood to constantly be prepared to face social challenges that view them as adults (Herawati & Hidayat, 2020). During this transitional period, individuals explore due to increasing demands and differences compared to previous stages (King, 2014). The challenges at this age can lead to anxiety (Marsidi et al., 2022).

A phenomenon observed at the Kotagede II Community Health Center in Yogyakarta during the period from May to July 2023 revealed that every week, approximately 4-5 young adult males sought counseling for anxiety-related issues. The anxieties experienced varied, ranging from concerns about their future and their relationships with the opposite sex to employment. Based on this phenomenon, a screening for anxiety cases among young adults in the Kotagede District in Yogyakarta was conducted. The process began by distributing flyers via social media. Interested subjects then contacted facilitators via WhatsApp. Subsequently, the subjects were asked to provide their personal information, anxiety symptoms, and the duration of their experiences. Based on the data obtained, five young adults tended to be anxious, all male.

Experiencing anxiety during the early stages of adulthood can be quite challenging; individuals need a platform to express and address their anxieties. One intervention that can be employed is expressive therapy, which involves writing and drawing. Writing is an expressive therapy focused on emotions. It allows the release of pent-up anger through writing and can facilitate new experiences for individuals. Writing is a way of communication that enables individuals to develop their thoughts and learn about events or experiences they have encountered (Bolton, Howlett, Lago, & Wright, 2004). Drawing flowers is another example of expressive therapy. This form aims to identify the subjects' strengths and weaknesses and motivate them by emphasizing that strength may come behind every weakness.

2. Literature Review

According to the American Psychological Association (2013), anxiety is an emotional state characterized by tension and worrying thoughts accompanied by physical responses (rapid heartbeat, increased blood pressure, and more). The anxieties encountered by individuals transitioning into adulthood are grounded by the expectation always to be prepared to face social challenges as adults (Herawati & Hidayat, 2020).

According to Barlow and Durand (2015), anxiety is a negative mood state characterized by physical tension, fear of the future, subjective discomfort, a series of behaviors (appearing worried, anxious, or restless), and physiological responses originating from the brain reflected in increased heart rate and

muscle tension. Anxiety is future-oriented and marked by negative influence, where one focuses on potential uncontrollable dangers or mishaps.

Anxiety is a normal response to a threat, but it becomes abnormal when the response given does not match the existing threat, such as spontaneous panic reactions without warning or triggers, leading to emotional pressure or disrupting an individual's ability to function (Nevid, Rathus & Greene, 2014). Anxious individuals have excessive worry levels of tension in anxiety-provoking situations and avoid stimuli or situations triggering anxiety. Anxiety can become a cause of suffering for individuals since it hinders normal functioning (Maina et al., 2016). Anxiety is a common reaction experienced by every individual. It is a response to uncomfortable situations. However, when anxiety becomes excessive and affects an individual's daily life, intervention or therapy measures should be taken to reduce its level to ensure it does not disrupt the individual's life. Chaplin (2001) describes anxiety as an unpleasant emotion related to various developmental issues, affecting affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects. Ramaiah (2003) adds that three factors influence anxiety: environment, suppressed emotions, and physical conditions. The environment affects an individual's self-perception and perceptions of others and creates a sense of insecurity about the environment. Suppressed emotions result from an individual's inability to find an outlet for their feelings in personal relationships. Anxiety arises when individuals suppress anger or frustration for an extended period. Physical conditions constantly interact with thoughts, leading to the emergence of anxiety.

Expressive writing therapy is a form of catharsis or a way for individuals to release negative emotions. Freud explained that when individuals can achieve catharsis by expressing conflicts or events they have experienced, it can help them improve and alleviate symptoms of psychological problems. Indirectly, through catharsis, individuals bring suppressed events from the subconscious to consciousness, thus helping them cope with traumatic experiences through writing (Brand, 1979). According to Pennebaker (2010), expressive writing therapy aims to help individuals channel their ideas, feelings, and hopes into a medium and provide appropriate responses to stimuli, thus avoiding wasting time and energy suppressing their feelings. Sari and Sumirta's research (2022) revealed that expressive therapy is effective in reducing anxiety in PLHIV (People Living with HIV). Furthermore, Khadijah et al. (2022) also proved that expressive writing therapy is effective in reducing anxiety levels in students in Surakarta. Tualeka and Rohmah's study (2022) also demonstrated the effectiveness of expressive therapy in reducing anxiety in adolescent girls in orphanages.

3. Metode

This study aims to determine the effectiveness of expressive therapy in reducing anxiety. The subjects in this study are five young adult males aged 20-28 years old with moderate to high levels of anxiety. Data collection techniques include observation, focus group discussions, and the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) scale. The hypothesis proposed in this study is that expressive therapy can reduce anxiety in early adulthood. The anxiety experienced by the subjects pertains to career, success, and relationships with the opposite sex. The method used is experimental research with a one-group pretest-posttest design without a control group. Subject selection was done using purposive sampling.

The data analysis in this study utilized quantitative analysis to observe the difference between pre-test and post-test using parametric analysis employing the Wilcoxon Test. The choice of the Wilcoxon Test for non-parametric data was made due to the sample size being <100 individuals.

4. Results and Discussion

Quantitative evaluation was conducted by comparing the pre-test and post-test results of the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) scale filled out by the subjects. The comparison of scores before and after the intervention is as **Table 1.** :

Table 1: Comparison of Pre-test and Post-Test Results of Subjects

Subjects	Pre-test results	Post Test results
MA	24 (moderate anxiety)	15 (mild anxiety)
MII	22 (moderate anxiety)	8 (mild anxiety)
MAH	40 (severe anxiety)	10 (mild anxiety)
RR	30 (severe anxiety)	8 (mild anxiety)
IS	38 (severe anxiety)	22 (moderate anxiety)

Based on **Table 1.**, it can be inferred that all subjects encountered a decrease in scores after the intervention. During the pre-test, it was found that out of five subjects, two experienced moderate anxiety, and three experienced severe anxiety. After the intervention, there was a decrease in post-test scores, with one person categorized as having moderate anxiety and the other four categorized as having mild anxiety.

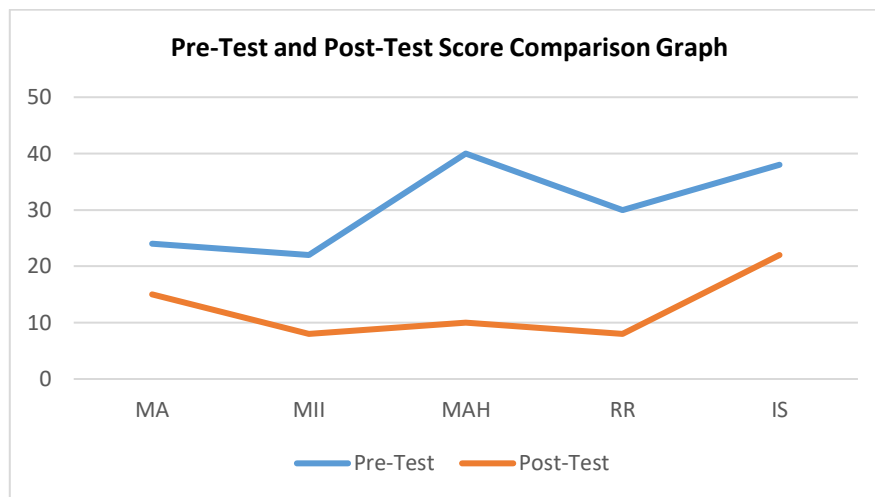
Quantitative analysis was also conducted to observe the difference between pre-test and post-test using the Wilcoxon Test. The results are presented in the following table:

Table 2: Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Results

Test Statistics	
	Post-Test - Pre-Test
Z	-2.023 ^b
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.043

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test
 b. Based on positive ranks.

Based on Table 2, data analysis indicates a significant difference in anxiety categories before and after participating in expressive therapy, with a -2.023 Z-value and a significance $p=0.043$ ($p<0.05$). The mean in the paired sample t-test shows the difference between the mean during pre-test and post-test. The pre-test score is higher than the post-test score. This outcome indicates that the expressive therapy administered has been proven to reduce anxiety experienced by young adults. Furthermore, the comparison graph results show that the anxiety scores of all subjects have decreased.



Comparison graph of the subjects' pre-test and post-test anxiety scores before and after being given expressive therapy

There are many techniques in expressive therapy; this study employs writing and drawing flowers, which were conducted over three sessions. The first session began with Session I, involving the presentation of assessment results. The researcher presented the assessment results to all subjects based on the outcomes of focus group discussions and the completion of the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) scale, which revealed that all five male subjects suffered from anxiety. The level of anxiety experienced by the subjects ranged from moderate to very severe according to the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) norms. Three subjects had severe anxiety, and two felt moderate anxiety. This anxiety manifested physiological responses such as rapid heartbeat and discomfort in the chest. Additionally, there were psychological responses from the subjects, such as feeling sad, low self-esteem, and difficulty concentrating when working. When the researchers presented the assessment results, the subjects appeared attentive and nodded when asked about their understanding of their condition and the issues they faced. During the question session, no questions were asked. All subjects stated they understood the assessment results presented. This session was followed by Session II, which involved the implementation of expressive writing therapy. In this session, subjects were asked to write freely and express their feelings on the bond papers provided. The subjects wrote about anything that made them feel anxious, including parental expectations, family perceptions of them, visions of a stable career in the future, and thoughts about married life. The subjects felt that their families had high expectations regarding their success without understanding the challenges they encountered. Out of the five subjects, all stated that they had never discussed their anxiety with their families. After finishing writing and retelling their stories, the subjects were instructed to pour out and focus their emotions onto the paper, then tear it up. The process of tearing up the paper helped the subjects feel relieved and suggested that the problems written on the paper would gradually crumble away like the torn paper.

The second meeting involved the implementation of expressive therapy through drawing flowers. In this session, all subjects actively drew and combined colors. The flower shapes the subjects drew

varied incredibly, with no two shapes being alike. In addition to writing about their strengths, subjects were instructed to list their weaknesses. After drawing, the subjects shared the strengths and weaknesses they had written down with each other. The strengths listed by the subjects were related to their performance, such as working hard, thinking deeply, and enjoying learning new things. Expressive therapy through drawing flowers is proposed to identify the subjects' strengths and weaknesses and motivate them by showing that there is also a strength behind every weakness. This session was followed by Session III, which involved completing the post-test. The scale used was the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI).

The third meeting involved presenting the post-test results, termination, and closure. The researcher presented the post-test results to all subjects. Based on the results of filling out the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) scale, it was found that all subjects gained a decrease in anxiety levels from moderate to high to low. The subjects expressed that they now understood that when unable to express their feelings, they could redirect them by writing on paper, pouring out their emotions onto it, and then tearing it up. When feeling low self-esteem, the subjects would remember that despite having weaknesses, they also had strengths for which to be grateful. In conclusion, the subjects understood the series of interventions conducted and used them to prepare to face future unpleasant events.

Expressive therapy focuses on emotions. This study used writing and drawing flower techniques. During writing, releasing angry emotions through writing and drawing can enhance individual experiences. Writing activities are one way of communicating, where individuals develop thoughts that can help them become aware of their events or experiences (Bolton, Howlett, Lago, & Wright, 2004). Then, expressive therapy through drawing flowers aims to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the subjects and motivate them by showing that there is also a strength behind every weakness.

Expressive therapy had a positive impact on reducing the subjects' anxiety. The subjects understood the efforts that could be made to overcome anxiety. They remembered that despite having weaknesses, they also had strengths for which to be grateful. Moreover, the expressions conveyed by the subjects also indicate the positive benefits gained after receiving expressive therapy.

This study proves that expressive therapy has a positive impact on reducing the subjects' anxiety. This finding is consistent with the study by Sari and Sumirta (2022) that expressive writing therapy effectively reduces anxiety in PLHIV. Furthermore, the study by Khadijah et al. (2022) also proves that expressive writing therapy effectively reduces anxiety levels among students in Surakarta. The study by Tualeka and Rohmah (2022) also proves that expressive therapy is effective in reducing anxiety among teenage girls in orphanages.

5. Conclusion

The research results prove that expressive therapy has a positive impact in reducing the subjects' anxiety. Thus, the hypothesis is accepted. Advice to the subjects: If they experience unpleasant events in the future, they are expected to be able to apply the skills that were taught during the intervention,

particularly expressive writing and flower drawing. Additionally, subjects can also take advantage of groups that have been formed as support groups to share and support each other.

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