

Effectiveness of Mindfulness-based Counseling on Social Anxiety Disorder among Adolescents

Sefa Bulut* and Liyana Thabassum

Department of Guidance and Counseling Psychology, Ibn Haldun University, Turkey

*Corresponding Author: Sefa Bulut, Department of Guidance and Counseling Psychology, Ibn Haldun University, Turkey.

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Abstract

Social anxiety and related conditions remain one of the most significant deterrents that adolescents face when engaging in social situations. Adolescents are at a stage of vulnerability that leaves the door open for a high incidence rate of social anxiety or Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD). Additionally, this condition brings with it a myriad of other mental health issues such as low self-esteem, depression, other anxiety disorders, substance abuse, to name a few. There is an increasingly high demand for non-invasive and non-intrusive therapeutic techniques to tackle this mental health concern amongst adolescents. This is where Mindfulness comes in; an act of being aware of the self, its sensory experiences, thoughts, and emotions, without any judgment. It is simply, a state of being in the present. This paper seeks to examine the effectiveness of Mindfulness-based therapeutic techniques in reducing social anxiety symptoms among adolescents. Mindfulness-based counseling techniques and related concepts are found to be instrumental in helping individuals attain emotional and cognitive self-regulation, and shift their attentional bias to incorporate experiences attained through all sensory modalities. Thereby reducing anxiety-related symptoms, depression, etc.

Keywords: Social Anxiety; Mindfulness; Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction; Self-Compassion; Adolescents

Introduction

Adolescents are at the very sweet yet frustrating age of trying to find themselves, who they are, and what they want in life. It's a harrowing process, to say the least, with hormonal changes and a weakened self-image, the search for one's identity is the main focus of this stage in life. It is at this stage that peer relations take precedence over familial ones, for it is with peer approval that social identities are created, 'who are the "cool kids" and who isn't, who do I want to be identified as?' are all decisions of importance to the adolescent. Feelings of belongingness are enhanced as they try to identify with a clique or group, further providing them with a safe space to grow and explore. Moreover, the relationships they have with their peers are a way for them to develop social skills, instilling in them a sense of competence and achievement [1]. However, Social Anxiety remains one of the main reasons for the disruption in the socialization process that adolescents are required to undertake as part of achieving key developmental milestones. According to the National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is reported to be the most commonly prevalent anxiety disorder with lifetime prevalence rates of up to 12%. The National Institute of Mental Health has also reported an estimate of 9.1% of adolescents to be suffering from SAD, with 1.3% suffering from a severe impairment.

According to the American Psychological Association, Social Anxiety is defined as the fear of social situations wherein there is a possibility of embarrassment or a risk of being negatively evaluated by others. It involves a deep-seated fear or concern about one's social

status, role in society, and behavior in public spaces. If said anxiety leads to impairment in functionality or significant distress in an individual, then a diagnosis of Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) may be given. This must of course be done after consulting The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) criteria for the same. However, given that the current paper views psychopathological conditions as involving both categorical as well as dimensional factors, a strict diagnosis of SAD was not taken as an inclusion criterion for the literature that will be referred to in this paper. Needless to say, when a diagnosis of SAD is made, the symptoms are severe with accompanying physiological responses (increased heart rate, sweating, trembling, etc.) to anxiety-inducing social situations. It reaches to a point that these social situations are avoided or endured with significant distress. Persistence of these symptoms along with the rest of the DSM criteria for longer than 6 months warrants a diagnosis of SAD.

One of the main features of SAD, according to cognitive models, is their disposition towards viewing their social world with excessive negative self-judgment [2]. Individuals with SAD tend to focus on internal cues, such as negative thoughts or self-imagery, and external cues such as facial expressions of others in social settings [3] at the same time. In other words, there is an attentional bias in people with social anxiety that sucks them into constantly thinking or ruminating about negative internal and external cues. This form of attentional bias and accompanying emotional reactions reinforce social anxiety symptoms in people. Furthermore SAD also includes hypervigilance and attentional avoidance of external stimuli [4], reduced cognitive and emotional regulation [5] and negative self-beliefs [6], in its symptomatology.

According to Lawrence and colleagues (2015), SAD is quite common among children and adolescents [7]. As mentioned earlier there are a high number of adolescents who face social anxiety symptoms at a severe level, although at times, not reaching the level required for clinical diagnosis [8]. SAD is known to be persistent and chronic especially if the age of onset is during early childhood and shows the highest risk of onset during early adolescents as compared to other anxiety disorders [9]. Evidence pointing to a genetic and biological predisposition for developing social anxiety, along with the risk of developing comorbid psychological conditions, makes for a condition that is hard to deal with if left untreated [8]. Adolescents are also faced with heightened stress reactivity, emotion dysregulation, and immature executive control as compared to adults [10].

Comorbid conditions may include depression, other anxiety disorders, or substance abuse [11]. Furthermore, social anxiety has been positively associated with increased consumption of alcohol in adolescents, as a way to cope with the anxiety, further leading to alcohol-related/substance-induced problems [12]. Impairments are also seen in social settings, interpersonal relationships, and occupational functioning, indicated by poor school performances and peer relations [11,13]. Studies have also hinted at gender differences in social anxiety, with girls reporting higher levels of social anxiety due to a greater sense of social inadequacy than boys [1].

Despite early adolescents being a typical age of onset for SAD, it goes undetected and therefore untreated by most mental health professionals [14]. Considering the chronic and remittent pattern followed by SAD, there need to be renewed efforts taken by mental health professionals in identifying and treating SAD or social anxiety in all its levels of intensity. Cognitive Therapy (CT) and Interpersonal psychotherapy are helpful with regards to reducing SAD symptomatology, with CT showing better results after a one year follow up [15]. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has also been found to be effective with anxiety disorders in general [16]. Although these methods of psychotherapy seem effective, a literature review by Herbert and Cardaciotto [11] points to the contrary as a notable number of patients have failed to respond to the above mentioned therapeutic methods. Moreover, some therapeutic techniques such as that of the exposure therapy used in CBT are rather intrusive and uncomfortable for the clients. Thus, there is a need for a less intrusive and holistic treatment approach for SAD or social anxiety.

Mindfulness

The concept of Mindfulness owes its emergence to the Buddhist philosophy, where it was known as “bare attention” or the process by which a non-judgmental appraisal of one’s moment to moment experiences is undertaken [11,17,18]. The idea here is that the human

mind is untrained and raw in its response to experiencing events or taking in information, as it is constricted by egoism and complex attachments. The process involves being aware of oneself and others in the present without distorting the experience in any way. Most theories of Mindfulness emphasize that it is made up of two components, namely; present moment awareness and non-judgmental acceptance [11]. Other theorists have pointed on the importance of active curiosity, openness to new experiences, and the spirit of acceptance [19]. In a therapeutic setting, mindfulness is implemented either in a separate therapy format or by combining it with other therapy formats, such as with CBT.

Mindfulness in therapy seeks to help individuals in developing awareness of thoughts and emotions as they emerge, to accept them without judgment, and to maintain and enhance the process of attention [18]. The implementation of mindfulness-based therapeutic techniques is effective for Anxiety-related disorder in general and especially so for generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder [11]. Needless to say, the effectiveness of mindfulness on SAD can be witnessed in the next section of the paper. Mindfulness is also effectual in emotional regulation related to anxiety in adolescents [10]. The use of this technique not only helps in the reduction of anxiety-related symptoms but also in facilitating overall growth and development in varied sectors of life. Studies supporting this idea have been plenty, with one study showing how mindfulness is instrumental in reducing overall pain and suffering, and improving cognitive and emotional welfare [20]. Mindfulness also helps clients to learn self-regulation strategies, which ultimately results in the ability to control emotions or cognitions related to anxiety-inducing social situations [21].

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is one of the most commonly used therapeutic techniques that implement mindfulness. MBSR aims to change emotional responses through the modification of cognitive-affective processes [22]. This method boasts a reduction in anxiety-related symptoms through its utilization of relaxation techniques, and focus on present-oriented experiences [23]. The benefit of such a technique comes from the fact that it is noninvasive akin to traditional medicine. MBSR sessions may vary according to the requirements of the groups, their problems and other such factors, but a typical MBSR session may dabble in the following topics; learning meditative skills, attaining cognitive and emotional self-regulation skills, stress reduction methods such as yoga, etc [23]. It also involves breathing techniques, bodily awareness, awareness, and openness to sensory experiences and being able to shift one's attention across sensory modalities [22]. In other words, such therapies focus on teaching clients to open themselves to awareness, not just of the self and its sensory experiences, but to others and the environment, and the relational dialogue between the three.

Ye [23] conducted a randomized control trial to examine the effectiveness of MBSR on social anxiety among university students and it was found that students in the MBSR group registered a reduced perception of anxiety in social situations. Similarly, Goldin and Gross [22] examined MBSR's consequences on brain-behavior indices of emotional regulation, and reactivity of negative self-beliefs in SAD patients, confirming that MBSR does indeed help in the reduction of anxiety and depression symptoms and also boosts self-esteem. Other benefits of MBSR, which could help in the context of Social anxiety or SAD, are its capacity to amplify behavioral self-regulation [24] and enhance attention- behavioral responses [25].

Although MBSR seems to be the most prominently used mindfulness technique in recent years, other techniques have made good use of mindfulness in reducing social anxiety and related problems. One of them is Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), which is derived from a combination of MBSR and Cognitive therapy. The main factors in MBCT are teaching clients to improve their attention skills and to relate to momentary experiences as they happen without any judgment (Mindfulness), through the practice of meditation mainly [26]. This allows clients to be able to be aware of the processes that are happening within and around them, from physical sensations to emotional experiences, further allowing them to identify negative thoughts before they reinforce the anxiety.

Self-compassion, of which self-kindness, humanity, and mindfulness are a part of, has increasingly been used to alleviate signs of social anxiety and SAD. In a nutshell, self-compassion is the idea of being kind to oneself. There are specially designed Mindfulness Self-Compassion programs aiming to reduce anxiety which are quite effective. Considering individuals with social anxiety tend to have nega-

tive thoughts related to the self and others, they also find it hard to practice self-compassion [2]. Using self-compassion can help reduce any form of anticipatory anxiety that persons with social anxiety may face [27]. Programs such as these have also been proven to reduce anxiety, depression, and increase mindfulness, self-compassion, social connectedness, and better life satisfaction [2].

As can be seen from the literature until now, the main focus of mindfulness is to reduce negative thoughts that relate to internal and external cues, which then affect the person's cognition and emotions. Attention too seems to be a huge factor that increases social anxiety symptoms but can be resolved through mindfulness as well. There is also an emphasis on regulating emotions and behaviors, especially when faced with threatening stimuli. Not only does this help in the reduction of social anxiety symptoms but it also increases one's awareness of the self and the way the self relates to the cues from others and the environment. Through mindfulness people's awareness expands to physical and mental dimensions, giving them a good understanding of where they stand in terms of their problems, further enhancing their quality of life [28-30].

Conclusion

Overall, it may be said that the usage of mindfulness in counseling is quite effective in curbing and alleviating social anxiety symptoms and related comorbid conditions. It is not just a momentary relief from the anxiety that mindfulness offers, but instead, techniques such as meditation, breath regulation, yoga, and self-compassion, etc. also helps in enhancing one's quality of life. Riding the turbulent waves of adolescence is never easy. It is quite easy to fall into the misconception that one is alone in their experiences of fear and anxiety. Mindfulness overthrows this idea and proposes people are interconnected in their lived experiences. Mindfulness encourages people to be aware of their selves, to attend to their sensory experiences, and regulate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. It offers a holistic healing atmosphere that is non-intrusive in its application.

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