

## The Effectiveness of Solution-Focused Brief Group Counseling to Increase the Optimism of Students with Academic Stress

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### Abstract

High School students often experience high academic stress, even they are expected to achieve high academic achievement. In this case optimism holds an important role because students who have high optimism are believed to manage academic stress. Due to this background, the present study attempted to analyze the effectiveness of solution-focused brief group counseling to increase the optimism of Public Senior High School or SMA Negeri 5 Semarang students. It used pretest-posttest control group design and Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R) scale to collect the data which later were analyzed using mixed ANOVA. Findings indicated that the solution-focused brief counseling has been effective to increase the optimism of students with academic stress. Thus, counselors are required to master this type of counseling to foster students' optimism and reduce academic stress.

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## INTRODUCTION

Senior High School students are categorized as adolescent or at the transitional stage from childhood to adulthood in which changes frequently occur in their lives. They may experience various stress from trauma, events, constant tensions, and daily burden, especially academic problem. Academic problem is the major cause of adolescents in West and Asian countries, and has a significant relationship with mental health, namely depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.

In China, academic burden by students has become an educational issue. A national survey done to 5.040 adolescents and 6.552 parents by one of federations reports that almost a half of the total students (49.1%) spent 2 hours per day to do assignments from their teachers. Another national survey institution in China found that most children and adolescents (66.7%) experienced academic stress. It was caused by low achievement, pressure during exams, learning transition, and burden which impact students' mental health.

According to the previous facts, the researchers conducted a preliminary study regarding academic stress in SMA Negeri 5 Semarang on August 24, 2021 to 108 tenth graders using a simple questionnaire containing indicators designed by Goliszek (2005). It appeared that 20 students or 18.52% suffered from high level of academic stress, 42 students or 38.89% suffered from medium academic stress, and 46 students or 42.59% suffered from low academic stress.

Interviews done to the school counselors revealed that some students complained headaches, anxiety, nausea, vomited or diarrhea when they were about to join a particular class and exam. There were also students who got nightmares due to the burden of school assignments and other activities outside school. It can be concluded that some students who experienced high academic stress need to be given an intervention so as to reduce it.

To assist students with academic stress, the researchers started from increasing their optimism. The importance of optimism was inspired by the recommendation of Gómez-Molinero et al. who state that it is necessary to investigate an intervention to encourage optimism to increase students' resilience. When student optimism is high, students' resilience is also high; this causes students to not be affected by any stressors in their environment, so they will easily achieve academic success levels and can reduce anxiety and depression levels.

Various studied have proved optimism can affect academic stress. Yusuf & Yusuf (2020) conducted a study and proved that there is a relationship between optimism and academic stress. Then, Huan, et al. (2006) conclude there is a negative and significant relationship between optimism and academic stress. Also, findings of Mathur & Sharma's study (2015) states optimism and resilience significantly affect academic stress. It means that, one who has low optimism will have high stress.

According to Bortolotti (2018) optimism is related to success. People who are optimistic have positive beliefs about themselves and their future. These beliefs will positively affect their both physical and mental health. (Chen, et al., 2019) Having those two kinds of health will make someone be more productive have resilience and pro-social behavior. In addition to health, optimism will lead someone to achieve his goals and ensure his goals are achievable.

Some previous studies done to increase optimism are such as the use of Seligman's ABCDE counseling for students who change their majors (Munawaroh, et al., 2018). There is also a study which uses cognitive therapy and relaxation to increase university retirees (Limono, 2013). Darminiasih, et al. (2013) have proved that behavioral counseling with implosive and flooding techniques are effective to increase students' optimism.

Nurindah, et al., (2012) conducted a study on several adolescents to increase their optimism through positive thinking training and found this training can increase optimism and

provide motivation to face future, encourage to have life goals, and counter negative thoughts. However, the findings of this study are limited to the subjects with medium category optimism score and has not yet covered those with low and the lowest categories.

From the previous explanation, the past efforts to increase optimism were mostly done using trainings and rarely used counseling methods. Therefore, this study examined the effectiveness of an approach called Solution Focused Brief Counseling (SFBC) in the way it increases students' optimism. It was given to deal with students' academic problems. In SFBC, clients are trained not to focus on problems because it may lose their passion and power, instead they are assigned to find exception or solutions to problematic situations.

Walter and Peller in Corey (2013) mention solution focused brief counseling is a counseling model that describes how individuals can change and achieve their goals by utilizing strengths and resources they have. This theory is in line with the researchers assumption that this approach can be a suitable strategy to increase the optimism of students with academic stress.

A study by Koob & Love (2010) which used two approaches, namely CBT and SFBT indicates that SFBT is more effective to use for the placement of vulnerable children in the United States. Here, it is understandable that SFBT is fairly effective to increase academic resilience and coping stress in certain cases. Due to an assumption that SFBT is effective in academic cases, the researchers were motivated to examine this approach to increase academic optimism.

Another study has proved that the use of SFBC in a group setting is more effective than individual counseling. The group setting benefits economic and time efficiency aspects as well as provides intensive and dynamic social interactions which are surely absent from individual counseling (Prayitno, 2005). Hendar, Awalya, & Sunawan (2019) found SFBC counseling can increase academic resilience and self-efficacy.

This study attempted to determine the effectiveness of solution-focused group counseling to increase the academic stress of SMA Negeri 5 Semarang students. It is expected that this study can enrich guidance and counseling science in terms of the use of solution-focused brief group counseling to increase the optimism of students with academic stress.

## METHODS

To choose the subjects, 396 students initially were asked to fill out Scale for Assessment Academic Stress (SAAS) adapted from Snhia, et al. Here, the researchers found 92 students had high academic stress, 128 students had medium stress and 149 students had low stress. The 92 students with high category were given optimism scale (LOT-R) adapted from Carver, et al. and resulted 10 students had high optimism, 56 students had medium optimism, and 24 students had low optimism.

Of 24 students, the researchers selected 16 students using purposive random sampling and grouped them into two, namely experimental group (which received solution-focused group counseling) and control group (placebo). Each were 8 students.

This study used pretest multiple posttest control group design, in which the experimental group was given solution-focused group counseling, while the control class received a conventional treatment. Both groups were asked to fill out optimism scale (LOT-R) before the treatment (pretest), after the treatment (posttest), and two weeks after the treatment (follow-up). The results of these test were then analyzed using mixed ANOVA assisted with SPSS (Statistical Product and Service Solutions) 25 for windows. It aimed at determining whether solution-focused group counseling was effective to increase the optimism of students with high academic stress.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 16 subjects of the study in both groups (experimental group and control group) were initially given pretest using optimism scale (LOT-R) to determine the initial condition before the treatment. Based on the pretest, the experimental group members tended to have low optimism ( $M=7.75$ ;  $SD=0.46$ ), while the results of the pretest in the control group showed the category of low optimism ( $M=7.25$ ;  $SD=0.71$ ).

In details, the experimental group received solution-focused brief group counseling,

and the control group received no special treatment. After the treatments, both group were assigned to do posttest and follow-up using the same (LOT-R) scale. Then, all results of the test were analyzed using mixed ANOVA to measure the effectiveness of solution-focused brief counseling to increase the optimism of students with academic stress in SMA Negeri 5 Semarang. Details results can be seen in table 1.

**Table I.** The Effectiveness Test of Solution-Focused Brief Group Counseling on the Optimism of Students with Academic Stress

GROUP	T1		T2		T3		F(1,14)	F(2,28)
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
SFBC	7.75	0.46	17.88	1.46	22.75	0.707	449.64*	411.85*
CONTROL	7.25	0.71	7.38	0.52	7.50	0.54	1.96	
F (1,14)	1218.2*							
T x Group (F(2,28))	375.52*							

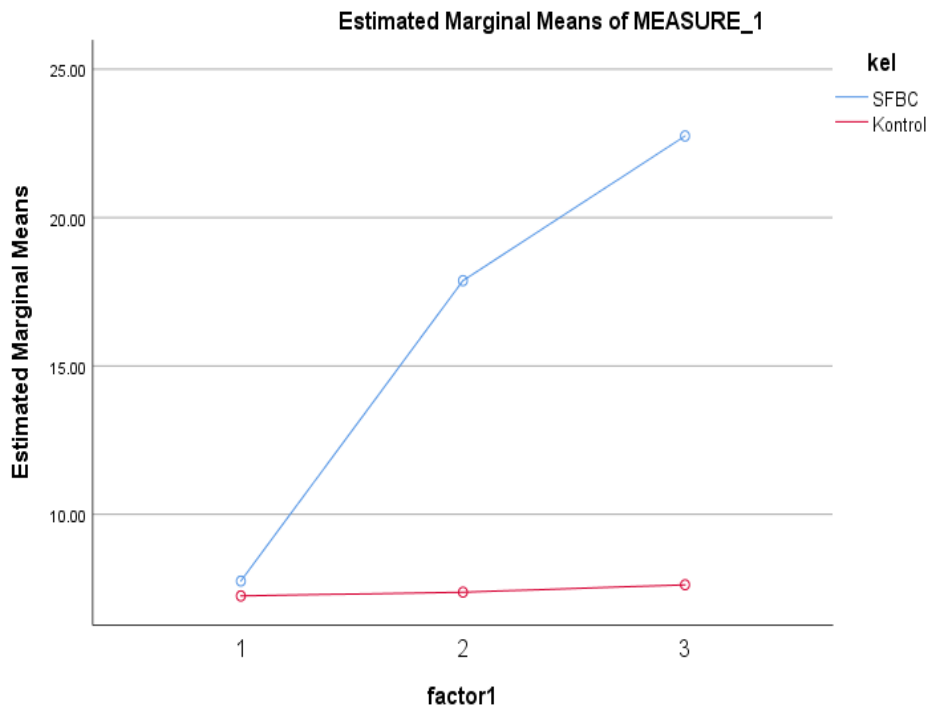
Notes \*= $p<0.05$  (significant), T1=pretest; T2=posttest; T3=follow-up

Mixed ANOVA test indicated an effect of time on optimism ( $F(2,28) = 411.85$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) from the results of the pretest, posttest and follow-up. However, the solution-focused brief group gained a significantly higher time effect on students' optimism ( $F(1,14) = 449.64$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) than pretest, posttest and follow-up. The measurement results at T1, T2 and T3 showed an increase as evidenced by the mean values which gradually increased in T1 ( $M=7.75$ ;  $SD=0.46$ ), T2 ( $M=17.88$ ;  $SD=1.46$ ) and T3 ( $M=22.75$ ;  $SD=0.71$ ). The results of the T2 and T3 scores also showed that the level of optimism was in the high category. This meant that there was an increase over time in the optimism of students with academic stress, and the solution focused brief group counseling was effective to increase the optimism of students with academic stress.

Similar results were achieved by the control group, but the significant effect of time was lower on students' optimism ( $F(1, 14) = 1.96$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) than pretest, posttest and follow-up. Although there was an increase in the level of optimism among students, it was not significant as seen from the results of T1 ( $M=7.25$ ;  $SD=0.71$ ), T2 ( $M=7.38$ ;  $SD=0.52$ ) and T3 ( $M=7.50$ ;  $SD=0.54$ ). In addition, even though the results of the T2 and T3 scores showed an increase compared to the T1 score, the students' level of optimism was still in the low category. This meant the control group gained no increase in students' optimism over time.

From the results of the data analysis, it can be concluded that the solution focused brief group counseling could have a greater significant effect on increasing the optimism of students

with academic stress from the pretest, posttest and follow-up than the control group. For more details, the results are projected in the graph in Figure I.



**Figure I.** Graph of Experimental Group and Control Group in increasing student’s optimism

The findings of this study are in line with what was found by Franklin, et al., (2017) who used solution-focused at school and found it effective to build student’s strengths, progress, personal choice and responsibility, commitment to achievement and hard work, self-evaluation, future success, and planning success and goals.

The solution-focused counseling done in a group setting has been proved effective to increase academic resilience and self-efficacy (Hendar, et al., 2020). Even though its duration is shorter than other methods, it gives greater impact on self-concepts in the moral and ethical aspects.

Apparently, the findings of this study were matched to the selection of SFBC approach that clients are trained not to focus on problems because it may lose their passion and power, instead they are assigned to find exception or solutions to problematic situations (Erford, 2016).

There has never been a direct study on increasing student optimism through solution

focused brief group counseling. However, the effectiveness of group counseling used in school settings has been widely carried out. SFBT in a secondary school setting can be carried out in a short intervention model that can support the academic environment. Solution-focused counseling carried out in a group setting has proved to be effective in increasing academic resilience and self-efficacy (Hendar, 2019).

**CONCLUSION**

Based on the results and discussion on the effectiveness of solution-focused counseling to increase the optimism of students with academic stress at SMA Negeri 5 Semarang, the following conclusions are drawn: (1) based on the results of Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R) scale, the initial condition of students’ optimism was low in pretest, and after getting a treatment, the optimism increased. (2) the solution-focused group counseling gains more effective and significant results in increasing the optimism of

students with academic stress than that of control group.

Even though this study shows that the solution-focused group counseling can give effective effects in increasing the optimism of students with academic stress, several limitations need to be considered, namely: (1) this study only focused on class X or tenth grade only and did not analyze differences in terms of gender and age of the subjects in relation to the improvement of optimism; (2) regarding the design, the method of determining the group of research subjects by randomize cannot really guarantee that it will create an equal composition of the three groups; (3) Follow-up in this study was only carried out at a time span of two weeks after the post-test.

The future researchers who are interested in investigating solution-focused group counseling are recommended to try other methods, such as using optimism as a moderator variable in reducing academic stress of students. In addition, they can expand the scope of the subjects to analyze differences in gender and age among the subjects. Then, to see better follow-up results, it is recommended to increase the time span not only after two weeks, maybe also see results after a month, two months and so on.

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