

Original Research

The Effect of Expressive Writing Therapy in Reducing Anxiety Levels in Adolescent Bullying Victims



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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Article history: Received: 29 May 2023 Accepted: 25 July 2023</p>	<p><i>Introduction:</i> Bullying is a social phenomenon that often occurs in society, especially in adolescents. There are many biological, psychological, and social changes that can cause conflict problems between themselves and the surrounding environment, causing victims of bullying that have an impact on the development of anxiety in these adolescents. The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of expressive writing therapy in reducing the level of anxiety among adolescents who have been victims of bullying.</p> <p><i>Methods:</i> The research method used quasi-experimental research with pre-test and post-test control group design approaches. The sampling technique with a total sampling of 44 respondents divided into 2, namely, the experimental group and the control group.</p> <p><i>Results:</i> The results of the study using the Paired Sample T-test showed that the value of $p = 0.000$ ($p < 0.05$) which means that there is an effect of expressive writing therapy in reducing anxiety levels in adolescents' victims of bullying. This can be seen in the decrease in anxiety scores in bullying victims of adolescents from a severe anxiety level of 50.0% to 41.0% in mild anxiety after the expressive writing therapy intervention.</p> <p><i>Conclusion:</i> Therefore, it is suggested that expressive writing therapy can be used as an intervention to overcome anxiety in adolescent victims of bullying both on campus and at home.</p>
<p>Keywords: bullying, expressive writing, anxiety, teenager</p>	

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a connecting period or a transition period between childhood and adulthood [1]. During adolescence, problems related to peer rejection are often encountered, which is usually caused by bullying. Bullying behavior is known as a social problem characterized by an aggressive action that contains elements of physical and verbal violence [2]. The prevalence of victims of bullying occurs in adolescents aged 12-17 years, up to 35% [3].

According to UNESCO data, almost a third of young people around the world have recently experienced bullying, more than 32% of boys and 28% of girls have experienced bullying at school [4]. The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) noted that within 9 years, from 2011 to 2019, there were 37,381 complaints of violence against children with cases of bullying [5]. For bullying in both education and social networks, the number reached 2,473 reports, and the trend continues to increase [5]. In general, bullying has become a tradition in schools that is carried out by seniors. Victims of bullying are usually reluctant to report it to other parties, parents who can make their situation worse. This is what makes bullying more rampant if not handled properly [6].

An increase in bullying cases causes a feeling of inferiority toward their peers and the community around them, emotional disturbances, depression, and feelings of anxiety. [2] Children who are victims of bullying tend to report more internalized behavior, as well as fear, anxiety, and can cause children to be afraid to go to school [7].

Anxiety is a feeling of discomfort and fear accompanied by physical symptoms, such as accelerated heart rate, dry mouth, body sweating, and tremors [8].

Treatment of victims of bullying can be done pharmacologically and non-pharmacologically, one of which is expressive writing therapy. Research shows that expressive writing can reduce levels of depression, anxiety, and stress [8]. In addition, expressive writing helps people better understand themselves and deal with depression, distress, anxiety, addiction, fear of illness, loss, and changes in their lives [9]. Expressive writing is an activity to write down the deepest feelings and thoughts about a traumatic event or emotional experience that you have ever had. The advantages of expressive writing therapy frees the victim to express all forms of anxiety in their writing without having to pay attention to standard wording or writing good and correct language [1]. Expressive writing therapy is carried out in 8 meetings in 4 weeks, takes 35 minutes, and is divided into 4 stages, namely recognition, examination, juxtaposition, and application to the self [10].

The study results found that there was an effect of expressive writing therapy on the level of anxiety in adolescent victims of bullying p -value = 0,000 ($< 0,05$) [2]. Similar research also shows that writing therapy is effective in reducing anxiety $p = 0.000$ ($p < 0.05$) [10]. Other research shows that there is a decrease in anxiety levels after receiving expressive writing therapy [11].

Based on this background, researchers consider it important to find alternative methods that are considered effective in

helping adolescent victims of bullying to anxiety levels so that researchers are interested in conducting research on the 'effect of expressive writing therapy in reducing anxiety levels in adolescent victims of bullying. The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of expressive writing therapy in reducing anxiety levels in adolescent victims of bullying.

METHODS

The design of this study used the Quasi experiment with a design approach of the control group before and after the test, which consisted of a group that collected data 2 (two) times, namely before treatment (pre-test) and after treatment (post-test) [11]. The variable studied in this study is the level of anxiety using expressive writing therapy.

The population in this study were all students who were attending the Nursing Academy of Kesdam Iskandar Muda Banda Aceh. The sampling technique used in this study was total sampling, with a total of 605 people. The researcher then conducted a screening stage using a bullying questionnaire that adapted and modified The Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire from Olweus in 1996 to determine involvement as a victim of bullying. The sample in this study were young victims of bullying who were willing to participate in the study, with characteristics of 12-24 years old [12], experienced anxiety using the HARS anxiety measurement scale (Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale) so that a total sample of 44 people was divided into 2 groups, namely the experimental group and the control group.

The process of collecting data in this study was that the researcher asked permission in writing from the Director of the Nursing Academy of Kesdam Iskandar Muda Banda Aceh with a research permit. Then, analyzing the number of students and selecting the number of respondents according to predetermined criteria and asking for research approval from respondents (informed consent). If there is a special request regarding the time to fill out the bullying questionnaire, the researcher will still openly provide a good opportunity for the respondent. The next process was collecting questionnaires. The researcher conducted a screening stage to detect respondents who were victims of bullying and measured the level of anxiety before treatment / intervention with expressive writing (Pre-test). After that, giving expressive writing therapy 8 meetings in 4 weeks, each meeting takes 35 minutes. Lastly, conduct a post-test by measuring the respondent's anxiety level again after receiving expressive writing therapy.

The data obtained were entered and processed using the SPSS application, which includes editing, coding, scoring, and tabulating. Then performed 2 data analysis. First, univariate analysis to identify the characteristics of the respondents (gender, age, class). Second, the bivariate analysis used the Paired Sample T-test to determine the effectiveness of expressive writing therapy in reducing anxiety levels in adolescent victims of bullying. This research received ethical approval from the Nursing Academy of Kesdam Iskandar Muda Banda Aceh with Number 17/KEP/AKIMBA/VI/2022, where

the researcher kept all the confidentiality of the respondents, and the data will not be disseminated.

RESULTS

Based on Table 1, it shows that the gender of victims of bullying is dominated by girls, namely 77.3% in the experimental group and 72.7% in the control group. The dominating age was 19 years, namely 31.8% in the experimental group and 19 and 21 years, 52.9% in the control group. The most dominant class is Level I at 40.9% in the experimental group and Level II at 40.9% in the control group.

Based on Table 2, it shows that there was a change in the anxiety level score before and after the expressive writing intervention, with an average score of 31.86 to 19.14, a median value of 36 to 19, and the highest score appearing from 27 to 19 in the experimental

group. Whereas in the control group the average value was from 30.59 to 29.64, the median value was 36 to 19, and the most frequently appearing score remained at an anxiety score of 27.

According to Table 3, the results of the Paired Sample T-test pre-test and post-test for the experimental group obtained results of $p = 0.000$ ($p < 0.05$) indicating that there was an effect after 8 interventions of expressive writing therapy and supported by the difference in mean values average 12.73. Thus, it can be concluded that there is an effect of expressive writing therapy in reducing anxiety levels in adolescents' victims of bullying. Meanwhile, in the pre-test and post-test control groups, the results obtained were $p = 0.052$ ($p > 0.05$) indicating that there was no significant effect after expressive writing therapy and was supported by a difference in the average score of 0.95.

Table 1
Frequency distribution of respondent characteristics (n=44)

No	Respondent characteristics	Experimental group (n=22)		Control group (n=22)	
		<i>f</i>	(%)	<i>f</i>	(%)
1	Gender				
	boy	5	22,7%	6	27,3%
	girl	17	77,3%	16	72,7%
2	Age				
	17 years old	0	0%	1	4,5%
	18 years old	4	18,2%	4	18,2%
	19 years old	7	31,8%	6	27,3%
	20 years old	5	22,7%	5	22,7%
	21 years old	6	27,3%	6	27,3%
3	Class				
	I	9	40,9%	6	27,3%
	II	8	31,8%	9	40,9%
	III	5	22,7%	7	31,8%

Table 2

Anxiety level scores before and after the intervention in the experimental group and the control group

Groups		Mean	Median	Modus	Standard of deviation
Experiment	Pre-test	31,86	36	27	7,93112
	Post-test	19,14	19	19	6,31445
Control	Pre-test	30,59	31,5	27	7,98172
	Post-test	29,64	27	27	7,73198

Table 3

The effect of expressive writing therapy on reducing anxiety levels in the experimental and control groups

Group	Mean	Average difference	CI 95%	P-value
Experiment	Pre-test	31,86	12,73	2,038 (3,314-2,639)
	Post-test	19,14		
Control	Pre-test	30,59	0,95	0,956 (3,335-3,231)
	Post-test	29,64		

DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the study, it was found that the sex of the most dominant adolescent victims of bullying was girls, namely 77.3% in the experimental group and 72.7% in the control group. Boys tend to do bullying, and girls tend to be victims of bullying more often [1]. According to the researchers' assumptions, this is due to the view that boys are stronger than girls, so that girls tend to become victims of bullying. Boys are seen to have more power than girls, so boys dominate all things. This is also reinforced by research that states that women have a secondary nature in feelings not based on their intellect. Women are more emotional, while men are more objective and rational, so they are able

to think and not prioritize their emotions. Because of that women react faster with their hearts, confused, afraid, and anxious [2].

The age of adolescent victims of bullying in this study was dominated by the age of 19, that is, 31.8% in the experimental group and the age of 19 and 21, that is, 52.9% in the control group. One of the factors that influence anxiety is age. The older a person is, the better the level of emotional maturity of a person and the ability to deal with various problems [3]. In adolescence, a person will easily feel anxious, especially when faced with a problem [4]. Individuals in their teens are in a transition period between children and adults. In adolescents, many changes occur both biologically, psychologically, and

socially. However, generally, the process of physical maturation occurs faster than the process of psychological maturation (psychosocial). Therefore, at this time, conflicts often occur between the adolescents themselves and the surrounding environment. If not resolved properly, it will have an impact on the occurrence of psychosocial problems and even mental disorders.

Based on the results of the study, it was found that the majority of the class of adolescents who were victims of bullying were dominant at Level I of 40.9% in the experimental group and Level II of 40.9% in the control group. At levels I and II are transition periods from changes in the school environment to the campus environment, due to several factors such as peer groups and school climate. Schools that are supposed to be places for children to gain knowledge and help shape positive personal character have instead become places where bullying practices thrive, thus giving fear to children to enter them. In addition to that, victims of bullying that occur on campus are acts committed by seniors against juniors. This shows that seniority is still a phenomenon that continues to occur on campus. The results showed that before expressive writing was performed in the experimental group (n = 22), all were in the anxiety range based on the results of the HARS anxiety scale with an average value of 31.86. The anxiety score that appeared the most was 27 with 4 respondents. The highest anxiety score is 41 with 2 respondents, and the lowest anxiety score is 19 with 1 respondent. While in the control group, the average pre-test score was

30.59. The anxiety score that appeared the most was 27 with 3 respondents, the highest anxiety score was 41 with 2 respondents, and the lowest anxiety score was 19 with 1 respondent.

After expressive writing was carried out in the experimental group, there was a decrease in the number of respondents who experienced anxiety from 22 respondents. 5 respondents did not experience anxiety with scores spread over several scores <14 and the rest experienced anxiety. The average post-test anxiety score in the experimental group was 19.14 and a score of 19 was the score that occurred the most with 2 respondents. The highest anxiety score in the post-test data for the experimental group was 29 with 1 respondent, and the lowest anxiety score was 15 with 1 respondent. Meanwhile, in the control group, the post-test average was 29.64 and an anxiety score of 27 was the score that occurred the most with 4 respondents. The highest anxiety score obtained in the post-test data for the control group was 41 with 1 respondent and the lowest anxiety score was 19 with 1 respondent.

In the experimental group, $p = 0.000$ ($p < 0.05$) which means that there is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test in the experimental group. Meanwhile, in the control group that did not receive expressive writing interventions, only informed about the dangers of bullying, the results obtained were $p = 0.052$ with the conclusion that there was no significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test in the control group. According to previous research results, writing is effective in reducing anxiety levels [13]. The results of the same research were

also found in research showing that expressive writing had an effect on reducing anxiety in students of class XI of SMA Negeri 59 Jakarta [14]. Other research also showed that writing therapy is effective in dealing with anxiety [15].

Intervention expressive writing therapy is a reflection therapy that allows individuals to change their cognition, regulate emotions so that they are better through cathartic means to gain new energy, relieve emotional stress, and provide opportunities to focus more on goals and behavior [16]. Expressive writing therapy is an activity in the form of opening thoughts and feelings about a traumatic event and experience that has been experienced [17].

This is also due to the provision of expressive writing therapy interventions carried out eight meetings in 4 weeks, each meeting taking 35 minutes. When the respondents received the intervention, the teens were enthusiastic when they wrote about their unpleasant experiences while on campus. They forget their feelings in written and expressive form, because they could not interpret their anxiety before and could not convey them to others. When expressive writing therapy was carried out in class, some teens seemed more relaxed when they communicated their feelings in written form on paper sheets. However, based on the study results, there were several respondents who did not experience a decrease because the respondents were not serious about carrying out the intervention.

The decrease in anxiety of the respondents in the intervention group was inseparable from the self-expression process

carried out during treatment, which could be used as an effort to overcome internal barriers and reveal hidden thoughts. In addition, emotional disclosure can also help individuals change the respondent's mind to be more positive. When respondents retell their emotional experiences in writing, a re-work process occurs in the brain and provides opportunities for respondents to better manage negative thoughts. [18].

The results of statistical tests performed using the Paired Sample T-test showed that $p = 0.000$ ($p < 0.05$), which means that there is an effect of expressive writing therapy on reducing anxiety levels in adolescent victims of bullying. This means that expressive writing therapy is effective in reducing the level of anxiety in adolescent victims of bullying at the Nursing Academy of Kesdam Iskandar Muda Banda Aceh.

According to the researcher's assumption, expressive writing therapy allows the respondent to express everything that is in his mind, because writing is an activity that produces thoughts and feelings in written form. This is consistent with the results of previous research showing that writing therapy is effective in reducing anxiety in adolescent victims of bullying at SMP Negeri 2 Kledung Kabupaten Temanggung $p = 0,000$ ($p < 0,05$) [10]. This is also reinforced by the results of research showing that there is an effect of expressive writing therapy on anxiety levels with a value of $p = 0.000$ ($p < 0.05$) [2].

Research similar to writing therapy can be used as a means to express emotions and reduce anxiety [19]. Writing can better classify one's own thoughts and feelings and

can reduce the pressure on a person. Writing can help release the intensity of feelings (emotional, sad, painful experiences, etc.) and can solve problems effectively because problems are generally solved with the left brain, but sometimes it is only found with the right brain, which is creative and intuitive. In addition, by writing a person can recognize the positive side of his personality that was previously hidden or blocked by mindset [20].

Someone can express themselves to gain a better understanding and transform that understanding into good emotions in solving problems. In addition, it can help cognitively reconstruct and organize traumatic events experienced by a person [21]. Writing emotional experiences can also affect physical health, showing a decrease in the activity of the autonomic nervous system and cardiovascular system, as experienced by individuals in the relaxation process [22]. The effect of writing activities on physical conditions can be explained from the point of view of inhibition theory, which states that harboring thoughts and feelings about traumatic experiences results in an accumulation of pressure/stress in the body and increased physiological activity. Thinking obsessively is related to stressful events, so in the long run it can cause individuals to always be in a stressful situation and feel socially threatened. By expressing his experience in words, the inhibition that has been felt so far will gradually decrease and there will be an improvement in health [18].

Writing down gripping events will lead to new understanding, and the problem becomes more limited and manageable after it is written down on paper. Writing down

emotional experiences can create a kind of structure and organization in the mind. When writing, the thinking process is forced to experience a slowdown and one can draw one idea to a logical conclusion [21]. Expressive writing therapy/writing on emotional experiences has also been shown to be effective in reducing anxiety and reducing health problems [22].

Furthermore, the distance and duration of writing also affect the decrease in anxiety scores, where this research was conducted in 8 meetings in 4 weeks, each meeting taking 35 minutes. This is in accordance with research that requires 8 meetings in 4 weeks where each meeting takes 35 minutes, and it has been proven that expressive writing therapy is effective in reducing anxiety in adolescents who are victims of bullying. [10].

The success of expressive writing therapy can also be seen in the decrease in the anxiety level of each respondent. The decrease in anxiety score was due to the emotional catharsis or emotional release process that occurred in the respondent when exploring his thoughts and feelings. Additionally, the respondents gained a new understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses to give them confidence and courage if they experience bullying and overcome their anxiety. During the therapeutic process, respondents were able to express feelings of anger, annoyance, and hatred, so they felt better, happy, and the negative feelings they had previously felt were slightly reduced. This means that when individuals are able to express and release their feelings and thoughts about the difficulties and obstacles experienced, this

situation provides individual catharsis. Therefore, the experience of the respondent during expressive writing therapy shows that it has a positive effect on the respondent and reduces the anxiety they experience [23].

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of research conducted on bullying victims in adolescents, it was found that the majority of the respondents experienced severe anxiety after receiving expressive writing therapy, there was a decrease in their level of anxiety to mild anxiety. Therefore, the results of this study indicate that there is an effect of expressive writing therapy on reducing the level of anxiety in adolescent victims of bullying at the Nursing Academy of Kesdam Iskandar Muda Banda Aceh. Therefore, it is suggested that expressive writing therapy can be used as an intervention to overcome anxiety in adolescent victims of bullying both on campus and at home.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest to disclose in this study.

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