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Awareness: The effect of group counseling on awareness and acceptance of self and others

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Abstract

In this research, the effect of raising awareness-oriented group counseling programme, predominated by cognitive behavioral methods, on self-awareness, cognitive structures, emotion regulation, and relationships of university students has been investigated. Study design is pre-post test, experiment and control group model. Self-reflection and Insight Scale, Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, and Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire were used as instruments. Mann-Whitney U test and Wilcoxon signed ranks test was used in the data analysis. The results showed that the programme was significant on the self-awareness, automatic thoughts, and emotion regulation. It can be concluded that the training programme may have permanent effects.

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1. Introduction

Awareness plays an important role in development of positive self-regulation and healthy interpersonal relationships and experiences. The concept of awareness, consists of many cognitive, emotional and social components, is defined as distinguishing subjective experiences, directing the attention to momentary living with an unbiased attitude and accepting them (Siegel, Germer & Olendzki, 2009). Louca (2003) pointed out that cognitive awareness comprises the recognition of individual's own cognitive structure, own perception, understanding and thinking.

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Teasdale, Moore & Hayhurst (2002) asserted that awareness is related to insight. Insight is defined as “the capacity to gain an accurate and deep understanding of someone or something (www.oxforddictionaries.com). However, insight should occur not only cognitive level, also on emotional level. According to Beck, emotional insight is to know the individual’s own inner world, deeper dysfunctional beliefs and to know them sufficiently in order to change their emotional- behavioral results (Beck, Baruch, & Balter, 2004).

Besides insight, the concept of self-reflection process is also related to awareness. Described as “thinking about the individual’s own thoughts and intentions” (von Wrihtg, 1992, cited in Akin &Yıldız, 2012), this notion points out the process of the individual’s perceptions. In this process, the individual endeavors to something identified as astonishing, interesting or hard, reconstructs it, and tries to give a meaning by objectifying it for making an inference about next actions. That is the reason why the skills helping to occur self-reflection for awareness can be taught (Grant, Franklin, & Langford, 2002).

Awareness develops the skills of recognizing the feelings of others and the individual’s own feelings. Emotional awareness comprehends thinking about emotional experiences and having information of the present emotion as well, however it is different from experiencing and expressing the emotion (Croyle & Waltz, 2002). Therefore, one has the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings, discriminate among them and use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions (Salovey& Mayer, 1990).

Developing cognitive and emotional awareness will be affective on one’s having ability of emotion regulation which is identified as an instrumental feature within the social life. Emotion regulation is formed by controlling, evaluating, intrinsic and extrinsic processes that are especially responsible for modifying the emotional reactions to accomplish the goals (Thompson, 1994). On the other hand, cognitive awareness consists of such high level skills as planning, self-controlling, checking, and developing cognitive strategies and self- awareness (Louca, 2003). In this context, cognitive emotion regulation is composed of such high level skills as perception and interpretation of social sings as a process, and forming behavioral reactions (Dodge & Garber, 1991; Feldman-Barrett, Gross, Corner-Christensen, & Benvenuto, 2001).

Garnefski, Kraaij and Spinhoven (2001) used “Cognitive Emotion Regulation” and “Cognitive Coping” as interchangeable terms. They indicated that the regulation of emotions through cognitions may be thought as indistinguishable in human life; and cognitions and cognitive processes may help to manage or regulate feelings or emotions. They focused on the cognitive aspect of coping and defined these processes as mental strategies and thoughts used for regulating intentional emotions.

Individual’s way of thinking is highly important in the development processes of cognitive and emotional awareness. Cognitive structures – schemas- sometimes shelter dysfunctional, irrational, automatic thoughts and beliefs. Automatic thoughts, dysfunctional beliefs and cognitive distortions are among these structures and they cause reducing awareness (Beck, 2001). However; replacing these negative and unrealistic thoughts with alternative and healthy thoughts will solve the problem and raise awareness (Köroğlu, 2013; Dobson & Dobson, 2009).

In the light of this information, raising awareness-oriented group counseling programme, predominated by cognitive behavioral methods, has been developed in this study based on the hypothesis of comprehending the relationship between feelings, thoughts and behaviors, realizing the automatic and unrealistic thoughts, then replacing them with healthy thoughts, and therefore raising awareness on this issue. It was aimed to examine the effects of the developed programme on the participants’ insight, self-reflection, cognitive and emotion regulation processes. In accordance with the main purpose, these hypotheses were tested:

1. There will be significant differences between experimental and control groups and their insight and self reflection, negative automatic thoughts and cognitive emotion regulation scores, in favor of experimental group.
2. There will be significant differences among pre and post-test scores for insight and self-regulation, negative automatic thoughts and cognitive emotion regulation processes of the students in experimental group.

2. Method

2.1. Study Group

The sample group comprised 24 students who have been studying 3rd grade in Marmara University Guidance and Psychological Counseling Department in 2013-2014. In the experimental group 7 female and 5 male and in the control group 8 female and 4 male students, in total 15 female and 9 male students participated voluntarily in the

study. The average age of the participants is 21,70 (sd=2.55) as the participants were among 20-28 ages.

2.2. Research Design

Design of research was based on pre-post test, experiment and control groups each of which included 12 subjects. Groups were organized as pre-test, post-test, experimental and control groups. Before starting the training programme, scales were applied as pre-test to both groups, after than ten sessions training were provided to experimental group. The scales were also applied as post-test to both groups.

2.3. Instruments

In the study Self-reflection and Insight Scale, Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, and Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire were used to gather data.

2.3.1. Self-reflection and Insight Scale

The scale was developed by Franklin, & Langford (2002) and adapted to Turkish by Akın & Yıldız (2012). It has 20 items and two subscales as called self-reflection and insight. Cronbach Alpha values of the original scale were calculated as .91 and .87; test-re-test values were .77 and .78, respectively. In the reliability and validity analysis of Turkish version, the internal consistency coefficients of the scale were .87 for self-reflection subscale, .78 for insight subscale, and .87 for overall scale. The corrected item-total correlations ranged from .30 to .60.

2.3.2. Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire

Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire was developed by Garnefski, Kraaij & Spinhoven (2001) and adapted to Turkish by Onat & Otrar (2010). It has 36 items and nine subscales. These are following: Self-blame, acceptance, rumination, positive refocusing, refocus on planning, positive reappraisal, putting into perspective, catastrophizing, other-blame. The questionnaire was positively related to Negative Mood Regulation ($r=-.572$). Cronbach alpha coefficient of the scale was found " $\alpha=.78$ "; test-retest correlation coefficient was " $r=.100$ ". Item-total correlation co-efficiencies vary between ".18" and ".46" item-reminder correlation co-efficiencies vary between ".10" and ".39"

2.3.3. Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire

Hollan and Kendall (1980) developed a scale which consists of 30 items with a 5- Likert-type. Original scale was applied to patients with depressive, non-depressive psychopathology, and other non-treated patients. The Cronbach Alfa value was found as .94, .89, and .91, respectively (cited in Savaşır & Şahin, 1997). The Turkish adaptation of the scale has been done by Aydın & Aydın (1990) and Şahin & Şahin (1992). Cronbach's alpha internal consistency was found as .114 in depressives and .95 with a normal group of patients (Aydın & Aydın, 1990) and in the other study with the student sample, it has been calculated as .93 (Şahin & Şahin, 1992). Test-retest reliability of the Turkish version of the scale is .77, and it has been reported that it was correlated with the subscales of the MMPI-D and BDI (cited in Savaşır ve Şahin,1997).

2.4. Process

In the preparation process of raising awareness-oriented group counseling programme that has cognitive and behavioral elements many sources were used (Türkçapar, 2012; Çatak & Ögel, 2010; McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 2009). The group work carried out as 10 sessions; the duration was 90 minutes and the frequency was a day in a week. During the sessions, the participants were asked to present information structured with skills, perform role-playing based on the scenario and experiences about the skills and do assignments about skills. After planning the sessions, the purpose of the study was announced. Both for determining the needs and aims of the participants, and informing them about the group process, pre-interviews were done. The group members were selected considering that not having been in such kind of study before.

The program was included ten sessions. In the *first* session, meeting and forming the group were aimed. The scales were applied as pre-test in this session. In the *second* session, the purpose was recognizing oneself and introducing the others in the context of creating awareness. In the *third* session, creating awareness about the body was aimed and by the imagination exercise, the reflections of emotions onto body were discussed. In this context, the technique of breathing was taught. The aim of the *fourth* session was gaining awareness about controllable behaviors and

choices. The factors influencing evaluation of behaviors were discussed in this session. The *fifth* session was held aiming at recognizing life goals, subjective thinking styles that allows to feel oneself inadequate, thinking mistakes and to be aware of those mistakes by the participants. The main concepts of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy also mentioned in this session. In the *sixth* session, the concepts of core beliefs, schemas and automatic thoughts and their relationships among them were aimed to be realized. The participants were asked to record/write the automatic thoughts for a week as homework. In the *seventh* session, it was aimed to evaluate the automatic thoughts and analysis, and to determine the relationship of these thoughts with cognitive distortions. The activities were done such as automatic thought exploration, Socratic questioning, proof investigation and alternative thought development. The importance of developing alternative thoughts towards intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships was discussed in the *eighth* session. In this context, communicational skill exercises were done such as empathy, active listening, showing the appropriate reaction, the usage of “you-language” and “I-language” and the effects of these exercises were discussed among the group. In the *ninth* session, it was aimed to improve the skills of recognizing emotions/feelings and expression of emotions. In the *tenth* session, the general assessment of the group was done. The evaluation form and scales were also given as post-tests.

3. Results

Before the programme, the scale’s scores of experimental and control group were examined by using Mann Whitney-U test. The results are given in Table 1 ve 2.

Table 1. Mann-Whitney U test results for experimental and control groups’ pre-test scores in terms of Self-reflection and Insight Scale and Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire

Scales	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of	U	P
Self-reflection	Experimental	12	12,92	155,00	67,000	,799
	Control	12	12,08	145,00		
Insight	Experimental	12	14,04	168,50	53,500	,291
	Control	12	10,96	131,50		
Automatic Thoughts	Experimental	12	11,05	121,50	55,500	,361
	Control	12	13,73	178,50		

As presented in Table 1, there is not any difference between experimental and control group pre-test scores of Self-reflection and Insight Scale and Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire.

Table 2. Mann-Whitney U test results for experimental and control groups’ pre-test scores in terms Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire

Scale –	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of	U	P
Self-blame	Experimental	12	12,08	145,00	67,000	,767
	Control	12	12,92	155,00		
Acceptance	Experimental	12	13,50	162,00	60,000	,483
	Control	12	11,50	138,00		
Rumination	Experimental	12	10,92	131,00	53,000	,269
	Control	12	14,08	169,00		
Positive refocusing	Experimental	12	10,88	130,50	52,500	,250
	Control	12	14,13	169,50		
Refocus on planning	Experimental	12	11,33	136,00	58,000	,416
	Control	12	13,67	164,00		
Positive reappraisal	Experimental	12	11,46	137,50	59,500	,469
	Control	12	13,54	162,50		
Putting into perspective	Experimental	12	11,04	132,50	54,500	,307
	Control	12	13,96	167,50		
Catastrophizing	Experimental	12	12,29	147,50	69,500	,307
	Control	12	12,71	152,50		
Other-blame	Experimental	12	13,67	164,00	58,000	,884

Control	12	11,33	136,00
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It was found that there is not any differences between experimental and control group pre-test scores of all subscales of Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire

After the programme, to examine the difference between experimental and control group Mann-Whitney U test applied. The results are presented in Table 3 and 4.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U test results for experimental and control groups' post-test scores in terms of Self-reflection and Insight Scale and Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire

Scales	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of	U	P
Self-reflection	Experimental	12	15,75	189,00	33,000	,023*
	Control	12	9,25	111,00		
Insight	Experimental	12	15,67	188,00	34,000	,028*
	Control	12	9,33	112,00		
Automatic Thoughts	Experimental	12	9,25	111,00	-33,000	,024*
	Control	12	15,75	189,00		

* $p < .05$

According to the results, there are meaningful differences between experimental and control group's self-reflection, insight and automatic thoughts scores. The differences occurred in favor of experimental group.

Table 4. Mann-Whitney U test results for experimental and control groups' post-test scores in terms Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire

Scale –	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of	U	P
Self-blame	Experimental	12	6,67	80,00	2,000	,000***
	Control	12	18,33	220,00		
Acceptance	Experimental	12	15,46	185,50	36,500	,039*
	Control	12	9,54	114,50		
Rumination	Experimental	12	17,25	207,00	15,000	,001**
	Control	12	7,75	93,00		
Positive refocusing	Experimental	12	16,75	201,00	21,000	,003**
	Control	12	8,25	99,00		
Refocus on planning	Experimental	12	16,96	203,50	18,500	,002**
	Control	12	8,04	96,50		
Positive reappraisal	Experimental	12	15,79	189,50	32,500	,022*
	Control	12	9,21	110,50		
Putting into perspective	Experimental	12	14,17	170,00	52,000	,233
	Control	12	10,83	130,00		
Catastrophizing	Experimental	12	7,96	95,50	17,500	,002**
	Control	12	17,04	204,50		
Other-blame	Experimental	12	8,58	103,00	25,000	,006**
	Control	12	16,42	197,00		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Mann Whitney-U test indicated that there are differences between experimental and control group scores received cognitive emotion regulation scale. The differences occurred in all subscales, except for “putting into perspective” scale, and in favor of experimental group.

In order to examine the differences between the pre-test and post-test of experimental group, Wilcoxon Signed Rank test was conducted and results have been given in Table 5 and 6.

Table 5. The result of Wilcoxon Signed Rank test in terms of Self-reflection and Insight Scale and Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire

Scales	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of	Z	P
Self-reflection	Negative Value	2	4,50	9,00	2,15	,031*
	Positive Value	9	6,33	57,00		
	Equal	1				
Insight	Negative Value	3	7,17	64,50	2,011	,044*
	Positive Value	9	4,50	13,50		
	Equal	0				
Automatic Thoughts	Negative Value	10	4,25	8,50	-2,39	,017*
	Positive Value	2	6,95	69,50		
	Equal	0				

***p<.05**

As can be seen in Table 4, according to the Wilcoxon test, statistically significant differences have emerged between pre-test and post-test scores of self-reflection, insight and automatic thoughts.

Table 6. The result of Wilcoxon Signed Rank test in terms of Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire

	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of	Z	P
Self-blame	Negative Value	12	,00	,00	-3,11	.002**
	Positive Value	0	6,50	78,00		
	Equal	0				
Acceptance	Negative Value	9	5,90	59,00	2,38	.017*
	Positive Value	10	7,00	7,00		
	Equal	1				
Rumination	Negative Value	0	,00	,00	-3,00	.003**
	Positive Value	11	6,00	66,00		
	Equal	1				
Positive refocusing	Negative Value	5	5,30	26,50	-,10	.917
	Positive Value	5	5,70	28,50		
	Equal	2				
Refocus on planning	Negative Value	0	,00	,00	-2,96	.003**
	Positive Value	11	6,00	66,00		
	Equal	1				
Positive reappraisal	Negative Value	0	,00	,00	32,50	.022*
	Positive Value	9	5,00	45,00		
	Equal	3				
Putting into perspective	Negative Value	2	2,00	4,00	-1,38	.168
	Positive Value	4	4,25	17,00		
	Equal	6				
Catastrophizing	Negative Value	4	4,75	19,00	1,25	.210
	Positive Value	7	6,71	47,00		
	Equal	1				
Other-blame	Negative Value	9	5,33	48,00	-2,12	.034*
	Positive Value	1	7,00	7,00		
	Equal	2				

According to Wilcoxon test, statistically significant differences were found between pre-test and post-test scores of Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire. Except for Putting into perspective and Catastrophizing subscales, all subscales have different scores between pre and post- test scores.

4. Discussion

This research was designed for testing the efficacy of the group counseling programme prepared as raising one's own and towards others' awareness. The programme, based on cognitive-behavioral approach and held by 10

sessions, was prepared according to the experimental and control groups with pre-test and post-test model. 15 female and 9 male students, totally 24 students attended in the programme (12 for experimental and 12 for control group). Before and after the programme, scales as pre-test and post-test were applied to the both groups. In the pre-test applications, it was analyzed that there is no differences among experimental and control group students regarding the measured qualifications.

In parallel with the purpose of the research, while testing the efficacy of group counseling, the hypothesis developed, as there will be differences between the students who attended the programme and those who did not. According to the conducted data, there were significant differences between the control group and experimental group after the application of the programme. These significant differences occurred in favor of the experimental group on the levels of insight-self-reflection skills and negative automatic thoughts. When examining cognitive emotion regulation skills, the significant differences were determined in favor of the experimental group considering the skills such as self-blame, acceptance, focus on the thought, positive reappraisal, refocus on planning and positive refocusing.

Developing awareness-oriented group counseling programme was prepared to improve the skills of recognizing and accepting the participants' oneself and others. Besides raising awareness in respect of one's own perception and body, the activities were done as about determining the factors that affect on the decisions and choices, exploring cognitive structure and distortions, and replacing them with healthy thoughts. The exercises were done in order to develop effective communication skills, recognizing others' feelings and thoughts and cognitive emotion regulation skills. Findings have shown that these exercises and applications had a positive effect on the students who attended the experimental group.

Another hypothesis of the research is that there will be differences on the students' -before and after attending the group counseling programme- regarding the skills of insight and self-reflection, negative automatic thoughts and cognitive emotional regulation. The conducted data presented that students' insight and self-regulation skills increased, although negative automatic thoughts decreased. Within the scope of cognitive emotion regulation skills, the participants' acceptance, focus on thought, refocus on planning and positive reappraisal increased, whereas self-blame and blaming others decreased.

The activities about recognizing oneself and others, carried out during the programme, comprised cognitive, emotional and physical elements. It was seen that intra-group exercises, homework and feedback given by the group members to each other raised awareness and insight of the participants. Conducted studies have shown that when insight is low, it was pointed out that obvious strains on mental skills and related to that situation, lack of social inadequacies was experienced (Brüne 2005; Grant, Franklin, & Langford, 2002). It was believed that awareness developed within the group study would positively affect the individuals' sense of self and social relationships.

On the other hand, it was also observed that the participants' negative automatic thoughts decreased. Türkçapar (2012) stated that automatic thoughts are cognitions aroused spontaneously mostly under emotionally stressful moments in the stream of consciousness. Dysfunctional premises and core beliefs that create rules are the source of these thoughts (Köroğlu, 2013; Dobson & Dobson, 2009; Beck, 2001). Unrealistic, illogical and non-adaptive beliefs and schemas may lead to emergence of cognitive distortions (Beck, 2001). It is believed that replacing these dysfunctional beliefs with alternative healthy thoughts would solve the problem. Therefore, cognitions and feelings will be regulated altogether (Dobson & Dobson, 2009; Beck, 1995).

In this study, cognitive applications for recognizing the relationship between feeling and thought, determining negative automatic thoughts, making analysis, exploring core beliefs and cognitive distortions are included in line with ABC theory. Instead of unrealistic and non-adaptive thoughts, how to develop healthy thoughts was taught by intra-group applications and homework. The decreasing of negative automatic thoughts among the students who attended the programme proved us that these skills were acquired by them.

Another finding supported the expectation that the participants would be able to modify the skills of cognitive emotional regulation. Realizing the relationship among emotion-thought-behavior, acquiring the skills of questioning the beliefs underlying the feelings facilitated to regulate the feelings cognitively for the participants. Data has shown that there is a great deal of improvement considering acceptance, focusing on thought, refocus on planning (thinking about the steps for coping with any kind of event) and positive reappraisal (giving meaning to the event in terms of personal development) strategies of the participants. Decreasing in the tendency of self-blame and

blaming others can be interpreted as programme has contributed to the development of cognitive emotion regulation.

In conclusion, it can be asserted that raising awareness oriented group counseling programme has an impact on the participants' insight- self-reflection, negative automatic thoughts and cognitive emotion regulation skills for modifying emotion-thought and behavior level.

Cognitive and emotional awareness will positively affect the individual's relationship with both oneself and others, since it helps to acquire the skills of prediction about the feelings. With the help of these skills, the individual recognizes not only what he/she feels and what is felt, but also he/she makes the necessary regulations by evaluating the options and situation, as well. Considering that these skills are acquired, it is seen that there is a need for more applications to raise cognitive and emotional awareness. In this case, such kind of applications should be reproduced not only with university students, but also with different sampling and the results should be compared, and it will be a reference for the following studies. Besides, conducting qualitative and longitudinal researches for determining the variances about awareness enables the further researches to investigate the subject thoroughly.

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