

Brief Positive Psychotherapy: Implication of Reducing Negative Thoughts in College Student's Interpersonal Relationships

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Abstract-Academic performance is often considered as a benchmark of student success in adjusting to college life. Nevertheless, students also face various problems in their life that will indirectly affect their academic performance. One of the problems that could be an obstacle to achieving optimum academic performance is interpersonal relationships. The inability of students to overcome the various demands and problems in their interaction with the environment will affect their relationships with friends and the people around them, which will ultimately also result in declining academic performance. Positive psychotherapy intervention is used to help clients with problems that affected their life functioning, including interpersonal relationship. Nowadays, the wide use of positive psychotherapy is growing because it focuses more on the positive things in a human's life and explores an individual's strengths, rather than focusing on problems; also, to encounter negative thoughts and replace it with positive ones. It will build positive emotions that will help the participant through the problems encountered. Positive psychotherapy has been widely used to help people with negative emotional symptoms (depression, mental disorders) and problems with interpersonal relationships. This study conducted positive psychotherapy to treat a 20-year-old female college student with interpersonal problems and negative thoughts in her relationships with others. Brief positive psychotherapy was conducted to interfere with the negative thoughts regarding interpersonal relationships. The client focused on negative perceptions of her problems in her past and present and felt overwhelmed by her negative emotions. She could not find positive aspects related to her situation. With brief positive psychotherapy, evidence is presented through positive and negative aspects of experience rather than being opposite ends of a single dimension of negativity. The client presented with the importance of positive cognition in mental health. This therapy allowed the client to directly apply in her daily life, and the effects of the therapy were monitored directly by a therapist. Six sessions were conducted by applying several techniques of positive psychotherapy. The first session was a pre-session to gather information from the client and create a good rapport. The second to fifth session were intervention sessions to recall the client's positive experiences, explore the client's signature strength, use the forgiveness technique, and manage the action plan based on the client's signature strength. The sixth session was the termination session. The duration of each session was approximately 90 to 120 minutes. The effectiveness of the therapy was measured by comparing the pretest and posttest results of the subjective well-being questionnaires, observed behavioral changes, and information gathered from the client through the interview technique. At the end of the intervention, the client's negative thoughts had been reduced, and the subjective well-being score increased 8 points. The dimensions of self-acceptance and autonomy were the two dimensions with the highest score increases. After completing the intervention, the client reported a change in regulating her negative emotions, and her communication and relationships with her mother and boyfriend improved. The client also reported that she could be more focused on her studying and the relationships with her classmates are improving. At the beginning of the

session, the client looked stressed and had difficult discussing experiences and her problems; after each session, the client seemed more relieved and had better communication in discussing her experiences and her problems.

Keywords: positive psychotherapy, well-being

Introduction

Positive psychology deals with the individual's subjective level about the positive experiences that individuals have experienced subjectively and is related to well-being and satisfaction (past), pleasure, cheerfulness and happiness (at present), and cognitive constructs of the future—optimism, hope, and confidence (Gillham & Seligman, 1999; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive experiences are very closely related to the individual's subjective well-being, which is a key concept in positive psychology because subjective well-being makes life more meaningful. Subjective well-being is defined as a person's cognitive process and affective evaluation of their life. This evaluation includes an emotional reaction to an event in line with a cognitive assessment of satisfaction and fulfilment. Furthermore, subjective well-being is a widespread concept including a pleasant experience of emotions, low levels of negative emotions, and high life satisfaction. The low level of an individual's subjective well-being can trigger various psychological problems. Several interventions can be used to overcome these psychological problems, one of those interventions is positive psychotherapy (PPT).

PPT is a treatment based on positive psychology by Seligman et. al (2006). PPT is primarily based on Seligman's conceptualization of happiness and well-being. Seligman sorted highly subjective notions of happiness and well-being into five scientifically measurable and manageable components: (i) positive emotion, (ii) engagement, (iii) relationships, (iv) meaning and (v) accomplishment. This list of elements is neither exhaustive nor exclusive, but the literature has shown that fulfillment in these elements is associated with lower rates of depression and higher life satisfaction (Rashid, 2014). Seligman asserted that PPT may be an effective treatment for many disorders and focused this therapy on overcoming depression. The symptoms of depression often involve lack of positive emotion, lack of engagement, and lack of felt meaning, but these symptoms are typically viewed as consequences or mere correlates of depression. He suggested that these symptoms may cause depression and, therefore, building positive emotion, engagement, and meaning would alleviate depression (Seligman, et. al, 2006). Researchers have found that PPT enhances clients' psychological well-being (Ruini, et. al, 2014; Schrank, et. al, 2014) and significantly enhances well-being and decreases depressive symptoms.

PPT has three assumptions about the nature, cause, course, and treatment of specific behavioral patterns. First, psychopathology results when clients' inherent capacities for growth, fulfillment, and well-being are thwarted by psychological and sociocultural factors. Second, PPT considers positive emotions and strengths to be as authentic and as real as symptoms and disorders, and they are valued in their own right. Third, effective therapeutic relationships can be formed through the discussion of positive personal characteristics and experiences (Rashid, 2015).

Based on the literature, PPT has been able to increase subjective well-being. Researchers studying subjective well-being have argued that the main aspect of a good life is a person who loves their life. Subjective well-being is defined as the cognitive process and the evaluation of individual affections regarding life experiences. This evaluation includes an emotional reaction to an event that is assessed cognitively regarding satisfying it and meeting its needs. Therefore, subjective well-being is a broad concept that includes a pleasant emotional experience, low negative mood, and high life satisfaction. A positive experience in line with high subjective well-being is a key concept of positive psychology because it makes life more meaningful (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002).

Several theories have been asserted in discussions on the subjective well-being that an individual might achieve. The researcher that proposed “goal theory” argued that individuals who attain subjective well-being attain it when they move forward toward the ideal state or have fulfilled a goal they have set (based on their standards). Other researchers have developed this notion to combine the degree of a gap from a comparable potential standard. Michalos (1985) revealed that happiness is inversely proportional to the degree of inequality of standards, including what an individual wants, their experiences, and the most relevant aspects of their life. Similarly, Higgins (1987) concluded that the gap between an individual's "ideal self" and "real thoughts about himself" conveys an experience that result in negative emotions. The low level of subjective well-being can cause negative emotions that become the beginning of the emergence of problems related to social relations. Therefore, researchers use subjective well-being measurements to measure a decrease in negative thoughts. Through increasing subjective well-being, the client's negative thoughts diminish, reducing the problems in their social relationships.

Although the literature has been widely applied in cases of depression in clinical clients, the results of the research have demonstrated that PPT is also associated with an increase in subjective well-being. Therefore, PPT can also be applied in non-clinical cases where clients have negative thoughts about their life experiences and interpersonal relationships, which are related to a low subjective well-being condition. PPT focuses on recalling positive experiences and exploring the client's signature strengths with the goal of helping a client cultivate positive emotions and adaptively manage negative memories.

Based on the aforementioned literature review, the author believes that PPT is the appropriate intervention for client who ruminates on negative life events and always feels like an undesirable person in relation to the environment and a burden to others. These factors decrease subjective well-being and result in an individual who avoids social environments because they fear environmental rejection, worry about negative judgment from the environment, and ruminate on other negative topics.

This study used a Brief PPT model, adapted from Rashid (2014), that considers the effectivity of short-term therapy. In this case study, the one participant (a female college student, who we refer to as “the client”) was busy with college activities. Thus, applying the full PPT model was impossible. Although a Brief PPT model was used, it was still related to the three assumptions

of PPT: The model used in this study could increase the number of positive emotions and positive thoughts and find the signature strength in the client that could help her reach optimum functioning in her life.

In the full session PPT, a minimum of eight sessions are required, and specific objectives are applied in each session to fulfill the aforementioned assumptions. PPT has several exercise techniques that can be applied to clients. In this Brief PPT, only select exercises were provided to the client. These exercises were provided by adjusting the specific problems incurred while adhering to the three assumptions of PPT with the goal of helping the client to be able to perform optimally in her daily life, evokes positive emotions, and recognizes personal characteristics as strengths that can help him/her overcome the problems at hand.

The aim of this study was to assess the effectiveness of this Brief PPT to reduce negative thoughts in a college student's interpersonal relationships by increasing the level of subjective well-being. The author hypothesized that the Brief PPT could enhance subjective well-being and reduce negative thoughts in a college student's interpersonal relationships.

Methods

Research Design

A single case study was conducted to examine the effectiveness of PPT for reducing negative thoughts and enhancing the client's subjective well-being. The pretest–posttest design used to calculate the effectiveness of the treatment for the psychological problems. The questionnaire of subjective well-being was provided to the client before the treatment and at the end of the last session. The pretest and posttest were compared to conduct a quantitative assessment of the differences in the client's well-being before and after the treatment. Additional qualitative measurements were performed through a behavior observation after each session and an interview with the client.

Participant

The client was 21-years-old, a female college student, and classified as being in an emerging adulthood developmental stage. The client had problems with performing everyday activities that resulted in her ruminating over negative thoughts about the environment, which made developing satisfactory relationships with others difficult. The client could remember neither all the memories of her childhood since her parents divorced nor the positive experiences that had occurred in her life. She clearly remembered the negative experiences she had after her parents divorced. These negative thoughts affected her activities. The client could not sleep well at night, was easily upset by the environment when her expectations did not match reality, and limited her relationships with classmates. Additionally, these negative thoughts resulted in a worse relationship with her mother and many other difficulties in life.

Method of Intervention

The intervention comprised six targeted sessions. Each session with the client began by performing an assessment through observations and an interview. In the first session, the client

signed an informed consent form to agree participate in the treatment, and the questionnaire of subjective well-being was administered as the pretest measurement. In the sixth and final session, a debriefing was provided to the client to ensure that she could implement all the received treatment in the sessions into her daily activities.

The first session was conducted to explore the client's problem. She indicated that lately she had been feeling easily upset in relation to the environment when something occurred outside of her expectations. She felt that other people did not like her, and she always felt abandoned by others. At the age of 13 years, when her parents divorced, the client found out that her parents were not her biological parents. Since then, she has thought that she is an undesirable person to the environment and is always a burden in the lives of others. These thoughts decrease her level of subjective well-being; thus, she avoids the social environment for fear of environmental rejection and worries about negative judgment from environment.

In the second session, the client remained closed to the therapist. To help the client open up, the therapist applied the empty chair technique. The client sat facing an empty chair and imagined the person she was eager to meet sitting in front of her. Next, the therapist asked the client to talk to the person. The client began to cry and expressed a longing for her father figure because, since her parents divorced, the client had never received an explanation regarding the identity of her biological mother and father. At the end of the session, the therapist asked the client about her feelings and began to provide a preliminary explanation of positive psychology therapy. Finally, she was given a homework assignment to write about the most enjoyable experience in her life (positive experience) where she used her potential to achieve that positive experience.

The third session began with a discussion about the results of the writing homework and how the client actually has an inherent positive potential that can make her happy, similar to how she felt after reviewing her writing. Next, the therapist asked the client to fill in the "character strength" sheet to assess strengths that she may be unaware of. Then, the therapist discussed the results with the client. At the end of the session, the client was given a homework assignment to write down the three smallest positive experiences of each day (a blessing journal).

The fourth session began with a discussion about her homework (blessing journal). The purpose of the assignment was to increase the client's awareness and understanding that rather than focusing on the many positive things she experiences in her daily life, she expends too much energy on negative experiences. Then, the therapist led the client to remember a bad and good memory from her life. The role of bad and bitter memories was discussed in terms of how they perpetuate psychological distress. Positive cognitive reappraisal strategies were discussed to rewrite and repack bad and bitter memories. The benefits of good memories were also highlighted.

The topic in the fifth session was "Forgiveness." The therapist wanted to explore negative things in the client's life that she had not forgiven and continued to influence her life. Active listening techniques were performed to help the client gain insight that forgiveness and apologies could help her overcome her negative feelings. At the end of the session, the client was given a

homework assignment to write a letter comprising an apology and a forgiveness statement to the person of her choice.

In the sixth session, the therapist debriefed the client regarding the outcome of the meeting and asked the client what changes had occurred. At the end of the session, the therapist asked the client to fill out the subjective well-being questionnaire, which was the posttest used for comparison with the results of the pretest.

Table I. Description and target of each session

Session	Description	Target
<p>Session 1. Introduction, Counseling, Exploring the problems</p>	<p>The therapist buildTherapist created a good rapport with the client and attempted to explore the problems that made her consult with the clinic.</p>	<p>Build a good rapport. Assess the problem.</p>
<p>Session 2. Counseling, Empty chair, Orientation to Positive Psychological Therapy</p>	<p>Presenting problems are discussed in the context of the absence of positive resources, e.g., positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, character strengths, and meaning. At the end of the session, the client received homework, i.e., positive introduction.</p>	<p>Introduce PPT to client, prepare client for the treatment. Recall positive memories of the client’s experiences.</p>
<p>Session 3. Review the Homework positive Introduction Character strengths Dynamic Strengths Assessment</p>	<p>Client identified her character strengths and strengths illustrated in her positive introduction; character strengths are discussed to cultivate engagement and flow. Client completed a worksheet, i.e., a 72-item character strengths inventory; Benefits of positive emotions were discussed. At the end of the session, the client received homework, i.e., the blessing journal.</p>	<p>Explore the client’s signature strength from multiple perspectives.</p>
<p>Session 4. Review the homework Blessing Journal Good and Bad Memory</p>	<p>The role of bad and bitter memories were discussed in terms of how they perpetuate psychological distress. Positive cognitive reappraisal strategies were discussed to rewrite and repack bad and bitter</p>	<p>Help the client realize that bad memories can perpetuate psychological distress and the benefits of the good memories.</p>

Session	Description	Target
	memories. The benefits of good memory were also highlighted.	
<p style="text-align: center;">Session 5. Forgiveness. Gratitude</p>	<p>Forgiveness was explored as a potential option to transform feelings of anger and bitterness associated with a specific transgression into neutrality or even, if possible, into positive emotions.</p> <p>At the end of the session, the client received homework, i.e., “Forgiveness letter.”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Cultivating positive emotions and adaptively dealing with managing negative memory.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Fostering positive relationships, meaning, and purpose.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Session 6. Debrief Posttest Psychological Well-being</p>	<p>Therapist debriefed the client regarding the outcome of the meeting and asked the client what changes had occurred. Client filled out the subjective well-being questionnaire.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Review how the benefits of the treatment relate to the client’s general life. Re-measurement of subjective well-being.</p>

Measurement

The psychological well-being questionnaire by Ryff was used to measure the condition of the client’s well-being. This measuring instrument was used because the negative thoughts that emerged as the client’s main problems could be caused by the low conditions of the client’s subjective well-being. The questionnaire was adapted to the Indonesian language by Desvita and Puspa (2012). Zubir (2012) has re-calculated the reliability score of the test, and the calculation showed an alpha’s coefficient score of 0,074; thus, the test is reliable to measure psychological well-being. This questionnaire comprises six dimensions of well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relation with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. The 18 items on the questionnaire used Likert scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). As a unidimensional measurement, the total score of the six dimensions represented the condition of personal well-being. The higher the score, the higher the level of well-being.

Qualitative measurement was used and performed through observation and interview methods. After each session, the client was asked about her feelings and the benefits of the session conducted. Therapist recorded the observations regarding the client’s changes in behavior after each session. This method of measurement was also used to measure the client’s negative thoughts and collect data to compare with the subjective well-being score.

Results

In accordance with the purpose of this study, to reduce the client’s negative thoughts through a

Brief PPT intervention, the benchmark used to assess the decreases in negative thoughts was used to assess the increases in the results of subjective well-being.

The results were obtained by using quantitative techniques, namely, measuring subjective well-being before and after the intervention and comparing the results. Based on the subjective well-being questionnaire score, the client’s pretest and posttest scores were 58 and 66 points, respectively. The score increased 8 points after the intervention.

In addition, qualitative measurements were made through behavioral observations and interviews. After the first session, no significant changes in the client’s behavior were observed, and the client still showed limited response to the therapist by using short answers and quiet sounds. The behavioral changes began to appear after the second session, when the client used the empty chair technique. The client said that she felt more relieved after using this technique because she could express repressed feelings.

Behavior changes were observed in each session. The client looked more cheerful; admitted to realizing that all this time she had always ignored the positive things she experienced in life; felt more able to eliminate negative thoughts about the environment; began to foster interpersonal relationships in a more open manner without being easily affected by the situation she was facing; felt an increase in capability regarding regulating her emotions; started to organized her daily activities; and reported slow but steady decreases in her difficulties sleeping.

Table II. Behavior changes after each session

Session	Beginning	End of session
SESSION 1 Preliminary, Exploring Problems	At beginning of the session, the client looked stressed and was hardly able to discuss her experiences and problems.	At the end of the session, she seemed more relieved.
SESSION 2 Orientation to PPT	She looked more calm than the first meeting. Could not find what really occurred with her.	She could discuss her problems more clearly and in a detailed and specific manner.
SESSION 3 Character strength, Blessing Journal.	BehaviourBehavior changes began to appear, she looked more friendly. She could not find her strength and could not find any positive moments in each day.	She begin to realize that she had positive characteristic that could help her through this difficult time. She could see a simple things as positive moments.
SESSION 4 Good and Bad Memory	She still connected with her negative experiences. She felt s if her life was full of sorrows.	She realized that she had had many positive experiences in her life that made her feel happy.

<p>SESSION 5 Forgiveness, Gratitude</p>	<p>She blamed herself for her mom because of her bad attitude. She had thought that had always been a burden to her mom.</p>	<p>Her feelings about her mom were more positive. She could communicate well with her mom without arguing over simple things, as she had always done before.</p>
<p>SESSION 6 Debrief, Termination</p>	<p>She looked so friendly, always smiling.</p>	<p>The subjective well-being score increased by 8 points. She reported changes in regulating her negative emotions, her communication and relationship with her mother and her boyfriend improved.</p>

Discussion

Positive psychotherapy was used to reduce negative thoughts, improve the level of well-being, and increase the level of functioning for the client. The empty chair technique used in this intervention helped the client express feelings that had been difficult to express and uncovered the dominant figure affecting the problem. The client revealed her feelings of relief after using this technique because she could express pent-up feelings regarding her biological father who she had never met. After the second session, the client was observed to be more open to the therapist and began to realize that the negative relationship with her father was causing her to always feel unwanted, afraid of being let down, and other negative feelings.

A brief session of positive psychotherapy provided to the client by adapting protocols from Rashid (2014), including a positive introduction that helps clients realize the positive things that they have achieved. Rashid (2014) argued that through Positive Introduction, clients are able to not only tell and retell their stories, with the therapist's guidance, they may also be able to integrate parts of the self that might have slipped from their awareness because of cognitive rigidities, emotional instability, or relational insecurities. Clients are encouraged to make the narrative more personally meaningful and somewhat relevant to their current challenges, and this is facilitated through several multimedia illustrations, stories, and case illustrations.

The Basic PPT model has three assumptions about nature: cause, course, and treatment of specific behavioral patterns. First, psychopathology results when clients' inherent capacities for growth, fulfillment, and well-being are thwarted by psychological and sociocultural factors. Second, PPT considers positive emotions and strengths to be as authentic and as real as symptoms and disorders, and they are valued in their own right. The third assumption is that effective therapeutic relationships can be formed through the discussion of positive personal characteristics and experiences. This Brief model of PPT attempted to fulfill those assumptions by focusing on enhancing the client's positive emotions, finding the client's signature strength, and discussing the client's experiences regarding her positive personal characteristic.

The Brief PPT was effective to enhance the client's well-being because the client began to focus on positive experiences than negative experiences. The Brief PPT also helped the client realize that she has the inner strength to help her through the tough times in her life. Behavior changes first appeared during the third session, when the client was observed to smile more and laugh after sharing positive experiences.

Moreover, from the discussion with the client after last session, the client said that she felt much better and the frequency of sadness she felt was reduced significantly. She could see the positive aspects in her life that can help her overcome difficulties faced in everyday life. After the sixth session, she could communicate better with her foster mother without feeling negative emotions.

Quantitatively, the effectiveness of this adaptation therapy is shown from the increase in the client's well-being score. The pretest–posttest comparison shows that the score increased 8 points (58 on the pretest and 66 on the posttest).

This research has several limitations. First, other measuring instruments could have been used as a comparison to measure the client's negative thoughts. Second, follow-up measurements were not performed a few weeks after the last session; thus, whether the psychological changes that occurred were permanent remains unknown.

Conclusion

The application of brief positive psychotherapy can reduce the negative thoughts. This result was observed in the client's behavior changes at each session. In addition, the client showed a more positive perspective regarding every situations. This condition is in line with the improvement in the condition of clients' subjective well-being, which is shown by the increases in the subjective well-being score. Based on the subjective well-being questionnaire score, the client's score increased by 8 points on the posttest. Ryff (1995) asserted that to be well psychologically is more than to be free of distress or mental problems, it is to possess positive self-regard, mastery, autonomy, positive relationships with other people, a sense of purposefulness and meaning in life, and feelings of continued growth and development. After the sessions, the client reported that she the relationship with her boyfriend and her mother improved. Now, she could be more focused on positive experiences and view her past as only a part of her life. The positive psychotherapy has provided new capabilities to the client: She can view each experience from a positive perspective and recognize the potential in herself that can be developed to achieve her goals.

Further research is required to assess the effectiveness of full session positive psychotherapy to increase subjective well-being significantly. Overall, based on the quantitative and qualitative results, the implementation of short sessions of positive psychotherapy can effectively decrease negative thoughts and increase the subjective well-being.

Added-Values. This brief positive psychotherapy can enhance an individual's positive emotion without long-term therapy. The process of this therapy can help clients improve their perspective regarding creating relationships with others and managing academic problems.

Contribution to the society. As positive psychology techniques have more effects for an unhappy person, the technique can be useful to help people reduce negative emotions caused by the gap between self-perspective and a real situation. This therapy can be applied to help students who have difficulty with interpersonal relationships that affect their academic performance.

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