

Training Package for Fostering Stable Self-Esteem and Reducing Fear of Negative Evaluation and Testing its Effectiveness on Self – Handicapping

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Abstract

Introduction: Self-handicapping is a defense strategy in which a person, prior to any performance, creates some obstacles by which they manipulate their attributions after the performance. This variable is regarded as one impediment to educational efficiency. This study aims to design a training package to foster stable self-esteem and reduce the fear of negative evaluation to influence teenagers' self-handicapping.

Method: Based on an empirical research study and after the confirmation of the validity of the designed training package by experts ($p < 0.001$), one high school was selected through convenience sampling method from among Junior high schools. The population of eighth grade high schoolers (150) answered to Jones Self-Handicapping Scale (1982), Brief Form of the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNES-B) and Instability of Self-Esteem Scale (ISES). From among the foregoing population, a group of 60 high school students with an average age of 14 years old who had obtained the highest self-handicapping scores were randomly assigned to two experimental and control groups and received the training package for 8 one-hour sessions. Then, a post-test and a follow-up test were administered after one subsequent month. Data was analyzed using the regression analyze, independent-t method and mixed analysis of variance.

Result: The study results suggested the effectiveness of the training package in promoting the stable self-esteem and reducing the fear of negative evaluation and consequently reducing self-handicapping scores of the subjects ($p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0/315$).

Conclusion: This study proposes that, owing to the criticality of adolescence, training packages focusing on fostering stable self-esteem and decreasing fear of negative evaluation may be highly effectual in alleviating adolescents' self-handicapping and operate as a factor leading to more development and growth for them.

Keywords: Education, Fear, Evaluation, Self-esteem, Adolescents

Introduction

Almost every practitioner in the field of psychology and educational sciences holds that adolescence is the most critical and important period of human development. During adolescence, one approaches maturity, seeks autonomy and independence from childhood dependencies and attempts to discover one's identity. That is why teenagers may lack a stable mental status. It is exactly within this period that individuals face many behavioral problems [1]. Since teenagers are highly influenced by their peers, their relationship with their peers plays a considerable role in affecting their development [2]. A teenager's mind can be occupied by fear and worry because they are afraid that their teacher and/or peers make a negative evaluation of them [3].

According to Harter, from a teenager's perspective, perceptions of others' evaluation of them are derived primarily from the acceptance of the community where their performance ability is evaluated. When teenagers encounter a situation in which there is a possibility of mistake or failure, they begin to experience their own negative evaluation of themselves and subsequently exhibit a poor performance [4]. Researchers have pointed out in their studies that an individual who is afraid of negative evaluation by others, experiences anxiety in inappropriate forms as they are placed in situations where they are in sight of others and likely to be evaluated or criticized by them. As a result of this fear, they worry that others' judgments of them be negative so they try to avoid such situations since they feel that others may find them worthless or foolish [5-7]. Individual's increased fear of negative evaluation by others and then their avoidance of such situations help augment their anxiety [8].

When teenagers feel all eyes on themselves, it is this real or imaginary presence of others that augments the occurrence of self-handicapping [9]. Self-handicapping can be seen as a strategy a teenager employs to draw their attention away from their weak performance to protect their own self-esteem from being hurt. This strategy is manifested in two behavioral and claimed forms. The claimed self-handicapping refers to the situations where the individual claims a handicapping factor such as mental pressure, tiredness, or an exam anxiety; whereas in behavioral self-handicapping, they actively erect some obstacles to reduce their chance of success [10].

Embarking on the self-handicapping strategies, teenagers not only obfuscate evaluation conditions, but also seek to keep their self-esteem safe from being hurt since self-handicapping strategies are employed as one feels that one's important aspects which are related to one's self, e.g. self-esteem, may be threatened [11]. For self-esteem, self-assessment is located at the center of the issue. Those people who are hindered in achieving their own goals and those who see negative traits and particularities in themselves and find themselves unappealing possess lower self-esteem than others [12]. Findings by many researchers suggest that individuals of lower self-esteem utilize more of self-handicapping strategies compared to individuals with higher self-esteem [13-16]. This is while low self-esteem makes the suffering individual meet more of those situations which generate doubt as to their abilities and success [17].

The association between the low self-esteem and the use of self-handicapping strategies do not mean that they are not utilized by people of high self-esteem. Research studies conducted on the level of self-esteem and the self-handicapping reflect that both low and high self-esteem individuals make use of self-handicapping [18, 19]. Thus, it seems that one major factor predicting self-handicapping is one's stability of self-esteem rather than self-esteem level. Individuals with unstable self-esteem place their focus on the threatening aspects of unpleasant inter-personal events and they have been proven to have a larger extent of educational failure. This threatening feeling triggers the self-handicapping behavior [20]. As a

form of avoidance behavior, self-handicapping apparently leads to the reduction in, and damages to, performance and it exerts a persistent effect on individual's personality and future adaptability and also serves as an impediment to one's sound and efficient development. This is why it is critical to identify factors affecting the use of such strategies and to provide essential training for teenagers so as to alleviate the role of these factors and equip them with appropriate and effectual strategies for handling different situations to optimize their lifestyle. Although employing these strategies may be effective for a short period of time, it may bring about harmful consequences and generate a cycle of disappointment and fear in facing stressful situations when it turns to one's general pattern of performance and somehow one's lifestyle.

Taking into account the foregoing and the predictive roles of stable self-esteem and fear of negative evaluation as well as the fact that the self-handicapping itself is among factors influencing individuals' social and educational performance, the researcher attempted to design and develop a training package to nurture stable self-esteem and alleviate fear of negative evaluation, and to determine the effectiveness of the proposed package on teenagers' self-handicapping.

The hypotheses of this study was that, "Training Package for Fostering Stable Self-Esteem and Reducing Fear of Negative Evaluation can reduce students self-handicapping".

Methods

This study was an experimental survey with a control group, and pre-test, post-test and follow-up tests were used.

The statistical population of this study comprised all eighth grade high school students who were studying in the educational year of 2014-2015. The mean of students' age was 14, the standard deviation was 0.6. According to demographic studies, 2 percent of parents were illiterate, 9 percent had not finished high school, 57 percent of them had obtained their diploma/ associate's degree, 24 percent had bachelor's degree, 6 percent of them had master's degree, PhD or higher degrees. Two percent of the parents' education level was unknown.

While selecting a sample group, the convenience sampling method was employed. From among first-round high schools, one was sampled. The entire eighth grade high school students (150) who formed the research population of this study responded to the self-handicapping scale. Next, 60 high school students of the highest scores on the self-handicapping scale were selected as the research population. They were then randomly assigned to experimental and control groups.

Instruments used by this study for data gathering were Self-Handicapping Scale (SHS), Instability of Self-Esteem Scale (ISES) and Brief Form of the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNES-B). An informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

The 25-item Self-Handicapping Scale (SHS) introduced by Jones and Rhodewalt (1982) assesses individuals' attitudes to the self-handicapping with answers ranging from 'perfectly agree' to 'perfectly disagree'. This scale evaluates respondents' attitudes to the use of such strategies as a failure to attempt, feigning sickness, procrastination, emotional distress, and worry about progress. Correlation of this scale with related constructs such as excuse making and low effort in a sample of 245 individuals was reported 0.27 to 0.6. In addition, its internal consistency was reported 0.38 to 0.70 by various research studies [21].

Rhodewalt examined the factor structure of SHS and reported that only 14 out of 25 items had meaningful factor loadings on one or two factors, i.e. excuse making and effort. The excuse making subscale was related to one's tendency to pose obstacles and make up excuses prior to the under-evaluation act; and the effort subscale signified one's tendency to failure to make an effort for future success [22]. Researchers have utilized both versions of this scale and their findings revealed the effectiveness of these scales in measuring self-handicapping [23]. Heidari, Dehghani & Khodapanahi translated SHS and investigated its factor structure (21). They found that 23 out of 25 items had factor loadings on the three factors negative mood, failure to effort and excuse making. The reliability of this scale was measured at 0.86 by means of a 15-day-interval test-retest method, 0.6 for the excuse making subscale, and 0.72 for the negative mood subscale by means of internal consistency. The internal consistency was computed at 0.72, 0.81 and 0.61 for total self-handicapping, claimed self-handicapping and behavioral self-handicapping, respectively. In a research conducted by Shamsi, the reliability of SHS was reported as 0.78, 0.76 and 0.80 for total self-handicapping, claimed self-handicapping and behavioral self-handicapping, respectively, using Cronbach's alpha [24].

The present study used the 23-item version of SHS whose items were to be answered on a 6-point Likert scale (perfectly disagree "1", almost disagree "2", slightly disagree "3", slightly agree "4", almost agree "5", and perfectly agree "6"). The total score of the answers to items 4, 7, 8, 9, 13, 15, 19, 20 and 23 showed the negative mood subscale. Reversed total score of the answers to items 3, 5, 6, 10, 17, 21 and 22 indicated the effort subscale, and total score of the answers to items 1, 2, 11, 12, 14, 16 and 18 showed the excuse making subscale. Combination of negative mood with reversed score of effort (i.e. failure to effort) implied the behavioral self-handicapping, and that of negative mood with excuse making implied the claimed self-handicapping. Cronbach's alpha carried out by this study for SHS was measured at 0.72 for total self-handicapping, and 0.77 and 0.69 for the subscales claimed and behavioral self-handicapping, respectively.

Brief Form of the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNES-B: Leary, 1983)

This scale was developed to assess the anxiety derived from social evaluation based on the fear of negative evaluation scale [7]. This scale with its 12 items is used for

the measurement of the fear of others' negative evaluation, for the diagnosis of social phobia and other disorders, and for the examination of social behavior. In FNES-B, each item was answered on a spectrum of 5 degrees (1= never true to 5= almost always true). Higher scores signified higher levels of the experience of fear and anxiety. Eight items of this scale was worded positively and the other 4 items had negative wording. In scoring the negative items, therefore, scores had to be reversed [7, 25, 26].

Garavand, Shokri, Khodaei, Omarai and Tulaei administered this scale to 325 high schoolers to investigate psychometric features of FNES-B. In exploring the internal consistency of those items which were directly scored, Cronbach's alpha was calculated at 0.87. The correlation between the items and the whole questionnaire was 0.50 to 0.66. Also, the elimination of item(s) did not lead to any increase in reliability. In addition, Cronbach's alpha was calculated at 0.47 for the internal consistency of the items scored reversely. Once again, the elimination of item(s) did not lead to any increase in reliability [27]. Pakdaman & Mortezaei Nasiri performed an examination on 137 participants to assess the reliability of this questionnaire which was reported as 0.78 [28]. However, Cronbach's alpha of this scale was computed at 0.75 in the present study.

Instable Self-Esteem Scale (ISES)

The Self-Esteem Scale which was developed by Chabrol, Rousseau and Callahan, comprises 4 items which is a 4-point Likert scale (1= perfectly disagree to 4= perfectly agree) with a total score ranging from 4 to 16. Higher scores on this scale indicate more instable self-esteem [29]. Koinis also reported -0.498 and 0.350 for the correlation of the unstable self-esteem with the Rosenberg self-esteem and dependent self-esteem, respectively [30].

Chabrol *et al.* reported the reliability of this scale as 0.89(28). In another study by Koinis on the association of instable self-esteem and procrastination, the reliability was measured at 0.885 (30).

The reliability of the Unstable Self-Esteem Scale was computed at 0.867 in a study by Azadi, Fathabadi & Heidari with a two-week time interval ($P < 0.001$) which implied an acceptable reliability of the foregoing scale. They also reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.62 [31]. The present study measured the latter at 0.57.

Training Package

Another instrument utilized by the present study was a training package developed by the researcher to nurture stable self-esteem and reduce fear of negative evaluation. On the basis of the relevant references and research background on the foregoing variables, the researcher embarked upon designing the training package. This package had some contents on reinforcement and training of those constructs pertinent to the stable self-esteem, and some on reducing the fear of negative evaluation and self-handicapping as well as some worksheets as class and home assignments. The researcher tried to train them with a simple language but

in an applied way over 8 sessions. To determine content validity of the proposed training package, it was submitted to some experts (These professionals were Shahid Beheshti and Tehran University professors with doctoral degrees in the field of psychology that were expertise in self-handicapping ,clinical and educational

issues of adolescents.) and experts' agreed coefficient (of its internal consistency) stood at 0.57, which was significant at the level of significance (0.001).

Table 1 presents a summary of the training session contents. On average, every training session took 60 minutes.

Table 1. General Contents of the Training Sessions

Session	General Goals	Number of Sessions
1	Getting familiar with concepts; motivating	1
2	Promoting self-awareness; encouraging them to reach a realistic self-image and accept their strengths and weaknesses	2
3	Teaching positive inner conversation; revealing thoughts; identifying fundamental beliefs	2
4	Confronting wrong values imposed by environment; creating appropriate standards for valuating; defining terms	1
5	Distinguishing between reality and idea; questioning the extreme importance of others' approval and acceptance	1
6	Questioning extremely high standards of performance; identifying positive and negative perfectionism	1

Results

Descriptive indices of both experimental and control groups for three stages of pre-test, post-test and follow-up test are presented in Table 2.

In order to determine the contribution of each predictor variable in the variance explanation of self-handicapping researchers used regression analyze. The results are shown in table 3.

In Table 3, fear of negative evaluation and instability of self-esteem is the positive and significant predictor of self-handicapping, indicating that higher levels of fear of negative evaluation and instability of self-esteem contribute to higher levels of self-handicapping.

Results from the statistical analysis of data showed that the difference between the pre-tests of experimental and control groups was not significant for neither self-handicapping nor fear of negative evaluation. As a result, mixed variance analysis was employed to compare pre-

tests, post-tests and follow-up tests of the groups. Testing the assumption of the equality of error variances for the self-handicapping variable revealed that with $F=0.061$ at the level of significance 0.650 for pre-test, $F=0.048$ at the level of significance 0.828 for post-test and $F=0.005$ at the level of significance 0.946 for follow-up test, and for the variable fear of negative evaluation with $F=0.192$ at the level of significance 0.663 for pre-test, $F1.979$ at the level of significance 0.165 for post-test and $F=0.009$ at the level of significance 0.924 for follow-up test, the requirement of error variances equality was satisfied for both variables. Owing to the significance of Mauchly's test ($P<0.05$), the assumption of sphericity was violated, therefore it was reported in the table presenting the results of the modified Greenhouse-Geisser test.

As shown in Table 4, the association between stage and group was significant for both self-handicapping and fear of negative evaluation in experimental and control groups' pre-test, post-test and follow-up test ($p=0.001$).

Table 2. Descriptive indices for self-handicapping, fear of negative evaluation and instability of self-esteem in relation to the research groups and measurement stages

		Standard Deviation	Means
Self-Handicapping	Experimental Group	Pretest	7.69
		Posttest	6.07
		Follow-up test	6.78
	Control Group	Pretest	7.15
		Posttest	7.39
		Follow-up test	7.71
Fear of Negative Evaluation	Experimental Group	Pretest	6.64
		Posttest	4.15
		Follow-up test	4.69
	Control Group	Pretest	6.43
		Posttest	5.88
		Follow-up test	6.68
Instability of Self-Esteem	Experimental Group	Pretest	2.55
		Posttest	2.04
		Follow-up test	1.70
	Control Group	Pretest	4.48
		Posttest	2.02
		Follow-up test	1.89

With regard to the variable instability of self-esteem, the results revealed the difference of the experimental and control groups in pre-test. Considering the significant difference of the pre-tests of these groups, different scores of pre-test and post-test and those of pre-test and follow-up test were examined by independent-*t* test whose results are presented in Table 5.

As shown in Table 5, the mean difference of pre-test/post-test scores in the experimental group (M=2.79, SD=2.70) and in the control group (M=7.62, SD=4.64) was significant (P<0.001) and the mean of instability of self-esteem scores showed a reduction in both post-test and follow-up test compared to the pre-test in the experimental group.

Table 3. Self-handicapping based on fear of negative evaluation and unstable self-esteem predicting

T	β	R²	R	P	F	variable
4.24	33.7	11.3	33.7	0.001	18.01	fear of negative evaluation
4.45	35.2	12.4	35.2	0.001	19.87	Instability of Self-Esteem

Table 4. Results of mixed variance analysis for the comparison of experimental and control groups' pre-test, post-test and follow-up test for self-handicapping and fear of negative evaluation

		Partial Eta-Squared Coefficient	Level of Significance	F	Mean Square	Level of Freedom	Type III Sum of Squares
Self-Handicapping	Stage	0.334	0.001	28.554	344.569	1.526	525.783
	Stage*Group	0.315	0.001	26.209	316.267	1.526	482.597
	Error				12.067	86.977	1049.584
Fear of Negative Evaluation	Stage	0.127	0.001	8.133	148.199	1.811	268.431
	Stage*Group	0.223	0.001	16.52	292.492	1.811	529.787
	Error				18.221	101.432	1848.202

Table 5. Independent-*t* test for different scores of pre-test/post-test and pre-test/follow-up test for instability of self-esteem among the experimental and control groups

t-test				
Mean difference	Level of Significance	Level of Freedom	t	
Pretest-Posttest	4.83	0.001	35.437	4.50
Pretest-Follow-up Test	6.01	0.001	51	6.179

4. Discussion

As its main objective, the present study aimed to determine the effectiveness of the training package developed for fostering stable self-esteem and alleviating fear of negative evaluation on self-handicapping. Results obtained from the analysis of the variable self-handicapping revealed significance variations at assessment stages (pre-test, post-test and follow-up test). There was no significant difference between the scores of both experimental and control groups prior to the intervention. However, a significant decrease was observed after intervention and during the follow-up stage.

According to Higgins and Brglas, we need to change people's thoughts and beliefs about their functions to reduce self-handicapping, and this can be achieved through cognitive orientation techniques such as examining the automatic thoughts, replacing negative thoughts and clarifying the criteria for success. They also believe that self-handicappers are uncertain about their abilities which is identified as success -from the perspectives of others- in many cases. Thus, the treatment of these individuals should involve specification of success criteria for them [32].

In this context and based on the obtained results, it can be concluded that promoting empowerment of personality can lead to significant changes in emotional, cognitive and behavioral aspects [33]. For example, some researches [34-36] that were in line with the results of this study indicate that psychological and educational

interventions can be utilized for changing some items, such as, extreme perfectionism, approval-seeking, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of individuals as well as self-talk that can ultimately influence self-handicapping behaviors.

Some researchers hold that making use of self-handicapping strategies leads to a decreased interest in success, and ultimately to emotional exhaustion [32, 37].

Since self-handicapping is known as a strategy for confronting self-esteem-directed threat and is manifested in educational situations as the fear of failure and the fear of being evaluated by others, many studies reported a negative correlation between the use of self-handicapping strategies and educational efficiency, and contend that psychological interventions for boosting educational achievement should place their focus on decreasing the use of self-handicapping strategies among students [38]. According to the studies on self-esteem and its relationship with self-handicapping, since one major factor predicting self-handicapping is one's stability of self-esteem rather than the level of self-esteem, the longitudinal research studies based on Rosenberg questionnaire reported that individuals with unstable self-esteem had a kind of tendency to self-handicapping behaviors [18, 30, 39, 40]. Individuals with instability of self-esteem place most of their attention on the threatening aspects of unpleasant inter-personal events, and more educational failure has been observed among them. This threatening feeling triggers the self-handicapping behavior [20]. Results obtained by the

present study are in agreement with the results obtained by previous studies e.g. Barrett, Webster & Wallis and Anderson which used cognitive and behavioral interventions to augment the sense of self-worth among students while taking into account the effects of social praises and challenging negative thoughts, self-talk and automatic thoughts [41, 42].

It can be stated that the variables of this study are in such a close association with each other that unstable self-esteem causes fear of others' negative evaluation and excessive sensitivity to their judgments. This cycle eventually leads to self-handicapping behaviors. Continuity of the mentioned cycle and the use of self-handicapping strategies in various situations may impose serious damages and bring about drastic failures among teenagers. The expense of employing self-handicapping behaviors may involve negative implications from others [43], defective social relations [37], reinforcement of inefficient methods of confronting evaluation situations, and persistence of low-ability appraisals [44].

5. Conclusion:

To sum up, it appears that incorporating training packages, such as the one proposed by this study, into educational and therapeutic interventions in educational environments may help decrease the extent to which harmful confrontation methods including self-handicapping strategies are used among students, and also help minimize negative effects of such behaviors.

Such limitations as selection through convenience sampling, the population being restricted to 14-year-old female students, the lack of control over environmental factors and the affective atmosphere prevailing in their families and classrooms confine generalizability of the results obtained by this study. Utilizing questionnaires for assessment restricted the possibility of access to different variations derived from the intervention. The effectiveness of the proposed training package can be improved by supplementing it with methods which minimize the foregoing limitations such as conducting clinical interviews beside questionnaire administration, taking into account participants' family system, applying random cluster sampling for all male and female teenagers of different age groups, and holding more and longer sessions.

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