

Minimizing Exam Anxiety in Group Piano Students Using a Solution-Focused Approach

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Introduction

Exam anxiety is defined as “tension and apprehensiveness associated with taking a test, frequently resulting in a decrease in test performance” (American Psychological Association, n.d.). It is estimated that between twenty-five and forty percent of university students in the United States experience debilitating exam anxiety (Hanfesa, et. al., 2020). While Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has proven effective in treating exam anxiety, the problem focused nature of this approach causes students to focus on their faults which leads to further feelings of despair. Unlike CBT, solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) utilizes a solution-centered approach that forces students to use their strengths to improve their weaknesses.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Solution-Focused Brief Therapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has been used extensively in treating various psychological disorders. It is a problem-centered form of talk therapy where the therapist identifies a client’s corrupt thought patterns and challenges him to replace these with accurate ones through a process known as cognitive restructuring. One study conducted by Shikatani, et. al. (2014) on patients with social anxiety disorder showed that those who received one cognitive restructuring treatment prior to completing the study’s assigned speech task experienced a “59.8 point decrease in state anxiety...” (Shikantani, et. al., 2014, p. 574). Cognitive behavioral therapy provides great benefits to individuals with social anxiety. However, its problem focused nature causes the client to dwell on “what is wrong” with him which can lead to further feelings of despair.

Solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) is a talk therapy that seeks to help individuals suffering from anxiety and depression. Unlike CBT, solution-focused brief therapy utilizes a solution-centered approach rather than a problem centered one. By not concentrating on the problem, individuals are forced to discover “their own resources...to solve their own problems” (BienAime, 2011, p. 2). This focus

on unlocking one's strengths allows the individual to experience a sense of ownership that many problem centered approaches do not. A 2021 article on Forbes.com even praised SFBT as being "one of the most effective" methods to treat anxiety (Traverse, 2021).

Because solutions are thought to exist within the client, the therapist's role is to guide the client to solutions rather than suggesting possible ones. Therapists often work backwards, beginning with a discussion of the desired goal and determining how to achieve it. Like discovery learning, therapy sessions consist of the therapist asking skillfully crafted questions that help the client discover how to use his strengths to attain his goal. Also unique to SFBT's philosophy is the method of success measurement, which is measured by the client's feelings rather than the therapist's observations.

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to study the effects of solution-focused brief therapy on anxiety disorders. Due to the limited research specifically on solution-focused brief therapy and exam anxiety, this review will examine the therapy's impact on social and generalized anxiety disorders since these share many symptoms with exam anxiety. The search yielded that solution-focused brief therapy enacted positive changes on individuals with anxiety disorders.

In one pilot study conducted by Ramesh, thirteen study participants experienced drastic reductions of anxiety levels in a three-month period. Treatment sessions consisted of solution-focused tactics such as establishing "attainable goals...focusing on the future through future-oriented questions...and...focusing the conversation on exceptions to the client's problems" (Ramesh, 2015, p. 4). Anxiety levels were measured and compared by pre and post study surveys. The study yielded that thirteen out of fifteen participants (86%) reported having "no clinically significant Social Anxiety" by the end of the study (Ramesh, 2015, p. 5).

Similarly, research by Novella et. al. measured the impact of SFBT on college students with anxiety when delivered through in-person and online formats. Forty-nine undergraduate students were randomly assigned to receive three in-person or synchronized online treatments. Outcomes were assessed based on the participant's scores on the Beck's Anxiety Inventory (BAI) and College Counseling Assessment of Psychological Symptoms (CCAPS) scales. These results found that anxiety levels decreased an average of 50% in both online and in-person participants.

In addition to measuring the effects of SFBT in one-on-one settings, Taylor's quantitative study examined its effectiveness in group settings on individuals with generalized anxiety disorder. Thirty participants were organized into groups of three to four and received six weeks of solution-focused group therapy. In addition to learning and practicing the strategies in sessions, participants were given weekly assignments to complete outside of therapy. The effectiveness of the study was evaluated by comparing pre and post-test GAD-7 scores. Post-test scores revealed a significant eight-point decrease in the mean score, "M=19.30 on the pre-test to M=11.20 on the post-test" (Taylor, 2013, p. 52). Such findings demonstrate that group SFBT sessions are effective in treating generalized anxiety disorder.

The effects of SFBT on exam anxiety was measured by Altundag and Bulut in a 2019 study on sixteen Turkish high school students. Participants were assigned to an experimental or control group. Members of the experimental group attended a solution-focused session once a week for four weeks while members of the control group received "no intervention" (Altundag & Bulut, 2019, p. 5). The experimental group reported substantial decreases in "tension, bodily symptoms, worries, and test-irrelevant thinking subdimensions" (Altundag & Bulut, 2019, p. 8).

Suggested Strategies for Group Piano Instructors

The following strategies were developed based on the findings of this literature review. Fundamental solution-focused principles such as discussion of goals and self-evaluation occur in each strategy. It is the hope of the author to test these strategies at a later date to measure their effectiveness.

Achievement Reflections

Following an assessment, the group piano teacher reserves class time to reflect upon the class's achievements and to help them set new goals. These achievements need not be limited to improvements in one's exam anxiety but should rather consist of small victories students attain through diligent practice. Discussing these successes not only empowers students by showing them how much they've progressed, but also enables the instructor to help them discover the reasons for this progress. During this conversation, it is crucial for the piano teacher to follow each achievement with the solution-focused question "what did you do to attain this goal?" to help the class discover their unique strengths.

Peer Practice

Two weeks before an assessment, the group instructor assigns two students to perform their exam materials for one another. Following each "assessment," the non-performing student asks solution-focused questions to help the performing student rate his anxiety levels and the effectiveness of the resources used to manage them. The following is a list of potential questions for the students to ask:

- On a scale of one to ten, with one being very low and ten being very high, how would you rate your anxiety?
- What physical and/or psychological side effects did you experience most today?

- What did you do, or try to do, to minimize these?
- On a scale of one to ten, how effective were the strategies you used?
- If a miracle happened that caused you to never experience **insert side effect,** what would be or feel different as you play?

Performance Journals

At the start of each term, all students purchase a notebook to serve as their performance journal for the year. Each week, the instructor creates a low-stress performance assignment for the class that may include recording and evaluating a specific exam component in the practice room, sharing a clip of one's playing on social media, or playing exam materials for a small group of peers. After each "performance," the student is to write a paragraph describing what anxiety symptoms he experienced and what he did to manage them. Students should also rate their anxiety levels and the effectiveness of their strategies on a scale of one to ten to document which were effective. In the class following an exam, have each student share one discovery from his journal.

Conclusion

The true impact of solution-focused brief therapy on exam anxiety is unknown. While the literature strongly suggests the therapy to be a plausible option for managing exam anxiety, more research is needed to verify this claim. It is the hope of the author that the findings of this literature review will direct the group piano instructor's focus to the solution-focused approach for treating exam anxiety.

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