

Enhancing Student Emotion Regulation: A Cognitive Approach to NSSI

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Abstract

Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) is a maladaptive coping mechanism frequently observed among university students as a response to unregulated emotional distress, without suicidal intent. This case study aims to describe the psychological dynamics and assess the effectiveness of a cognitive-based intervention in helping a student manage NSSI within the context of higher education. The participant was a 27-year-old female with a history of self-harming behavior since her undergraduate years. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and psychological assessments using the WBIS, Rorschach Inkblot Test, projective drawing tests, and the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS). The assessment revealed unresolved emotional conflict, unmet social affiliation needs, and difficulties in emotional expression. Contributing factors included an authoritarian parenting style, limited emotional involvement from the father, and ongoing academic and social stressors. The intervention was delivered over six counseling sessions using a cognitive approach combined with emotional regulation education and assertiveness training. The results indicated a reduction in self-harm urges, improvement in emotional regulation skills, and the development of more adaptive coping strategies. These findings support the effectiveness of cognitive-based interventions in educational settings for addressing NSSI rooted in emotional conflict and poor emotional expression, highlighting the importance of integrating such strategies into mental health services on university campuses.

1. Introduction

Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI), defined as the deliberate infliction of harm on self-harm without suicidal intent, has emerged as a serious mental health concern among university students. Although not driven by suicidal thoughts, NSSI often reflects profound emotional distress, difficulties in emotional regulation, and challenges in establishing healthy social relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The pressures of higher education, including academic demands, social expectations, and the push for personal independence, can heighten students' emotional vulnerability, making this behavior a critical issue for psychological and educational research.

This growing prevalence of NSSI among students highlights the need for interventions that not only address emotional distress but also enhance students' capacity for adaptive coping and emotional regulation. While various psychological strategies have been proposed, interventions that integrate cognitive restructuring with emotion regulation training remain underutilized in university settings. Addressing this need is particularly urgent given that students who engage in NSSI often struggle with recognizing and managing emotions, which can impact their academic performance and overall well-being (Klonsky, 2007). Social factors such as poor family communication, limited emotional support, and low emotional literacy can worsen this situation. Walsh's (2005) biopsychosocial theory highlights the interplay between biological, psychological, and environmental factors in the development of NSSI. For university students, authoritarian parenting styles with low emotional attachment and fragile interpersonal relationships on campus are critical contributing factors that warrant attention.

The relationship between NSSI and emotional regulation has been well documented in previous studies. Klonsky (2007) identified NSSI as a maladaptive strategy to regulate intense negative emotions such as anger, sadness, and anxiety. Walsh (2005) proposed a biopsychosocial model illustrating how biological, psychological, and environmental factors interact in the development of NSSI. Freud's psychoanalytic perspective also suggests that unresolved intrapsychic conflicts can overwhelm the ego, leading individuals to resort to maladaptive defense mechanisms (Freud, 1923). More recently, Hasking et al. (2017) introduced a cognitive-emotional model that integrates theories of emotion regulation and social cognition to explain the onset and maintenance

of NSSI (Hasking et al., 2017). Christoforou, Boyes, and Hasking (2021) further highlighted distinct emotional profiles in university students who engage in NSSI, linking emotion dysregulation and alexithymia to the functions of self-injury (Christoforou et al., 2021). Similarly, Boyes, Mah, and Hasking (2023) identified family dysfunction and poor emotion regulation as significant predictors of NSSI in young adults (Boyes, Mah, & Hasking, 2023). Yorgason, Linville, and Zitzman (2008) noted that students in need often do not seek help due to stigma or lack of awareness.

Despite these insights, there remains a critical gap in applied intervention studies, particularly in the Indonesian higher education context. While numerous studies have explored the emotional and cognitive mechanisms underlying NSSI, few have directly evaluated the efficacy of cognitive interventions combined with emotion regulation education specifically for university students in Indonesia. This gap limits the availability of context-sensitive, evidence based practices to effectively address NSSI among this population.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the psychological dynamics of NSSI in university students and to evaluate the effectiveness of a cognitive based counseling intervention that incorporates emotional regulation training and assertiveness education. The objective is to contribute to the development of comprehensive psychological interventions tailored for higher education settings, promoting emotional resilience and reducing the risk of self-injurious behavior among students.

2. Method

This study employed a case study design within the framework of educational psychology, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the psychological dynamics underlying Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) behavior in a university student, and to evaluate the effectiveness of a cognitive-based intervention in an educational context. The case study approach was selected as it allowed for a comprehensive exploration of emotional, cognitive, and environmental factors that contextually influence individual behavior (Creswell, 2013). This educational case study focused on enhancing emotional regulation and adaptive coping skills as part of the student's personal development within the campus setting.

The participant was a 27-year-old unmarried female student who had completed an undergraduate degree in Social Welfare. She had a history of self-injurious behavior since 2017, with increasing frequency in recent years. Based on the educational psychology assessment, the participant exhibited emotional regulation difficulties, limited use of adaptive coping strategies, and interpersonal challenges that impacted her academic and psychosocial functioning in the higher education environment. The participant was selected purposively as she met the diagnostic criteria for NSSI as outlined in the DSM-5 (APA, 2013).

Data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis to interpret the results of interviews, observations, and psychological assessments in a narrative format. The analysis followed the model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing in a continuous cycle. Findings were categorized into affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects and then interpreted in relation to the academic environment and social relationships in the university context. This analysis informed a comprehensive case formulation and the educationally relevant intervention design.

Data collection was conducted thoroughly to gain a holistic understanding of the participant's psychological condition within the context of higher education. Primary methods included semi-structured interviews, observation, and psychological testing. The interviews explored the participant's developmental history, family upbringing, interpersonal relationships, emotional experiences, and the details of NSSI behavior during her college years. Observations were conducted throughout the assessment and intervention processes to examine emotional expression, communication style, and behavioral responses in academic and social settings.

The study was further supported by a multi-method psychological assessment approach. The tools included the Wechsler Bellevue Intelligence Scale (WBIS) to evaluate cognitive functioning and problem solving abilities, and the Rorschach Inkblot Test to explore personality dynamics and intrapsychic conflicts. Projective graphic tests such as the Wartegg, Baum Test, and Draw-A-Man were used to assess self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and emotional expression. Additionally, the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS) was used to identify psychological needs and relevant conflict areas. The entire assessment process adhered to psychological testing principles in educational psychology, emphasizing the importance of using diverse methods and contextual approaches to fully understand student behavior.

The intervention involved individual counseling using a cognitive approach, integrated with emotional regulation and assertiveness training. This approach was based on the participant's primary issue, which is difficulty in regulating emotions and reliance on maladaptive coping strategies. The cognitive framework aimed to help the participant identify her thought patterns and meanings associated with self-injury, especially since she expressed difficulty in understanding the impulses behind her behavior.

The use of Daily Thought Records was introduced as a therapeutic task to help the participant recognize her motives for self-injury, facilitate emotional awareness, and support emotional regulation. Assertiveness training was also provided to help the participant develop more adaptive coping strategies and promote healthy emotional expression in interpersonal contexts.

3. Results and Discussion

The psychological assessment of the subject, a 27-year-old female university student, revealed the presence of Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) behavior that had recurred for more than five years. The subject tended to harm herself in response to intense negative emotions such as sadness, frustration, and unexplained emotional tension. This behavior reflects a significant difficulty in recognizing, managing, and expressing emotions adaptively, an essential skill for personal development within higher education settings.

Interview and observational data indicated that the subject was raised in a family environment marked by an authoritarian parenting style that emphasized control but lacked emotional warmth. The limited emotional involvement of her father and the family's closed communication style contributed to the subject's inability to express emotions openly. In her academic and social life, she also experienced pressures related to academic demands, interpersonal conflict with a partner, and workplace stress. These experiences created an accumulation of risk factors that increased her psychological vulnerability to NSSI. These findings align with Walsh's (2005) biopsychosocial theory, which emphasizes that self-injurious behaviors can result from the interaction between environmental stressors, social relationships, and psychological factors.

The WBIS assessment showed that the subject had superior intellectual functioning with an IQ score 122, indicating adequate cognitive capacity to reflect on and participate in the counseling process (Wechsler, 1994). However, projective tests such as the Rorschach and graphic-based assessments revealed signs of intrapsychic conflict, emotional frustration, and unmet needs for social acceptance (Klopfer, 1954). The Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS) further indicated a high need for affiliation and acceptance, coupled with difficulty in managing negative emotions (Ogdon, 1984). These emotional deficits likely contributed to the emergence of self-injurious behavior as an escape from unresolved emotional distress. This supports Klonsky's (2007) view of NSSI as a maladaptive coping strategy used to regulate unexpressed emotional distress.

From the perspective of educational psychology, this case underscores the crucial role of emotional regulation and social-emotional development in supporting university students' well-being. The subject's difficulties in expressing and managing intense negative emotions highlight a common challenge faced by emotionally vulnerable students in higher education. Emotional illiteracy, fragile interpersonal relationships, and inadequate coping mechanisms can interfere with students' academic functioning and psychological health. This supports the findings of Guérin-Marion et al. (2021), who found that students who self-injure often experience emotion dysregulation and poor parent-child relationships, which contribute to their psychological distress. Similarly, Christoforou et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of emotion-focused interventions, as students with NSSI tend to exhibit distinct emotional profiles that require targeted support. Furthermore, Gonçalves et al. (2023) demonstrated that students with a history of NSSI tend to have lower resilience and self-compassion, indicating a gap in emotional support structures in universities (Gonçalves et al., 2023).

Higher education institutions must take a proactive stance by embedding psychological literacy and emotional skill-building programs into student services. Cognitive-based interventions that incorporate emotion regulation and assertiveness training, as implemented in this case, offer promising outcomes in reducing self-harm tendencies and promoting healthy self-expression. Conley, Durlak, and Kirsch (2015) found that university-based programs that teach emotion regulation and social skills significantly enhance psychological well-being and reduce emotional distress among students. Furthermore, Boyes et al. (2023) showed that emotional regulation plays a mediating role between dysfunctional family dynamics and self-injury behaviors, suggesting that strengthening emotion-related competencies can buffer the effects of psychosocial stressors. Thus, this case provides practical insights into how educational psychology interventions can address both the emotional and behavioral needs of students struggling with NSSI.

The intervention in this study consisted of six individual counseling sessions using a cognitive approach, integrated with emotional regulation training and assertiveness education. The subject showed strong engagement throughout the intervention and gradually became able to identify cognitive distortions related to her self-injurious behavior. The implementation of the Daily Thought Record (DTR) technique helped the subject identify automatic thought patterns and replace them with more rational and adaptive responses. Assertiveness training enabled the subject to begin expressing her emotional needs verbally which reducing her tendency to suppress or internalize emotional conflict. The results of each intervention session are detailed in Table 3.1, which presents the progression of the subject's emotional regulation, cognitive restructuring, and behavioral improvements across the sessions.

Table 1. Intervention Sessions Results

Session 1	The subject was able to understand the self-injury cycle and her own interpretation and meaning of the behavior.
Session 2	The subject gained insight into her problems with a close friend and her boyfriend, which made her feel highly emotional and exhausted, triggering strong urges to self-injure. She also began to recognize her emotional patterns and the cause-and-effect relationship behind her self-injury behavior.
Session 3	The subject explored issues related to her coworkers and developed an understanding of the emotional dynamics driving her desire to engage in self-injury.
Session 4	The subject realized that being assertive can serve as a constructive way to reduce emotional tension.
Session 5	The subject no longer experienced urges to self-injure and was able to express her emotions in a healthier way. She also found that journaling helped her regulate negative emotions effectively.
Session 6	The subject was able to think more logically in facing her problems and showed increased enthusiasm for learning how to regulate her emotions more effectively.

The effectiveness of this intervention is consistent with the meta-analysis by Conley, Durlak, & Kirsch (2015), which demonstrated that university-based mental health programs, including emotional and cognitive skills training can significantly enhance students' psychological well-being and reduce symptoms of distress. In this case, the subject showed decreased urges to self-harm, improved emotional expression, and increased use of positive coping strategies such as journaling and relaxation techniques

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that a cognitive approach combined with emotional regulation and social skills training is an effective intervention model within the context of higher education. It can help students build emotional resilience and reduce the risk of maladaptive behaviors such as NSSI, thereby contributing to their overall well-being and academic success.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results of the assessment, intervention, and case analysis, it can be concluded that the subject's Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) behavior reflects a maladaptive coping mechanism in response to unexpressed emotional distress, reinforced by an authoritarian parenting style, lack of paternal emotional involvement, and academic and social stressors in higher education. Although the subject demonstrated adequate intellectual capacity, psychological assessments revealed unresolved emotional conflicts, affective frustration, and unmet needs for social acceptance, leading to self-harming tendencies as a form of internalized emotional aggression. The cognitive counseling intervention, combined with emotional regulation and assertiveness training, effectively helped the subject identify irrational thought patterns, understand her emotional dynamics, and adopt healthier coping strategies, supported by the use of Daily Thought Records and improved emotional expression. This case study underscores the importance of holistic psychological interventions within higher education that address not only academic achievement but also emotional and social growth, aligning with Beck's (2011) cognitive approach and Walsh's (2005) biopsychosocial theory. Therefore, these findings can inform the development of educational psychological services aimed at supporting students with emotional challenges and reducing the risk of self-injurious behavior.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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