

The Impact of Acceptance and Commitment Group Counseling on Self-Compassion among Students Victims of Bullying

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Abstract

Research shows that bullying remains a serious problem that impacts the decline in students' self-compassion, thus disrupting their emotional well-being and learning process. The purpose of this study was to test the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)-based group counseling services in improving self-compassion in students who are victims of bullying at Yogyakarta. The research approach used was quantitative with a pre-experimental one group pretest-posttest design. The study involved six eighth-grade students because the group counseling design was selected by purposive sampling. Treatment was given in eight sessions, covering the six core components of ACT (acceptance, defusion, self-as-context, present moment, values, and committed action). The instrument used was the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS-25) adapted version of Neff. Data analysis used a paired sample t-test. The results showed a significance value of 0.000 (<0.05), meaning there was a significant increase in self-compassion scores after the intervention (average pretest = 53.33; posttest = 74.33). It can be concluded that ACT group counseling is effective in increasing self-compassion in students who are victims of bullying.

1. Introduction

School age is a critical period in individual development, where children develop not only cognitive skills but also social competencies. In the context of these interactions, negative behaviors such as bullying have the potential to hinder students' social-emotional development and psychological well-being. According to the International Student Assessment Program (2018), 41% of students experienced peer bullying at least several times a month at the age of 15. *Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia* (Indonesian Child Protection Commission) data (2022) also recorded a surge in bullying cases in schools, reaching 81 cases in 2022. Based on initial interviews from school at Yogyakarta, it was found that some eighth-grade students were victims of verbal and physical bullying, such as name-calling based on physical appearance or region of origin. This led to a decline in emotional well-being and self-isolation. The impact of bullying is not only felt physically by victims, but also psychologically. The victims often experience feelings of helplessness, sadness, anger, isolation, and a loss of self-confidence. Over time, this can lead to depression and decreased self-compassion.

Self-compassion is crucial for every student, as it reflects both rational and emotional abilities. Neff and Faso (2015) state that self-compassion as a person's ability to face mistakes and suffering by responding kindly to themselves, rather than judging themselves. Self-compassion is defined as a warm and understanding attitude toward oneself when facing failure or suffering, rather than ignoring the suffering or engaging in self-critical judgment (Neff, 2003). Victims of bullying often experience damage to all three components due to the negative labels they receive. These three main components support the construct of self-compassion: (1) self-kindness, which is a person's ability to accept and understand themselves as they are without hurting or judging themselves, and to show tenderness. The opposite is self-judgment, which is an attitude that encourages individuals to be critical and judge themselves, unable to accept shortcomings, so that they behave badly when facing difficulties, (2) common humanity, the understanding that all failures, challenges, and difficulties are components of the human experience felt by all humans without exception, not just themselves. The opposite is isolation, which is an attitude that encourages someone to see themselves as alone and isolated in suffering and difficulties, and to believe that the difficult events experienced only happen to them, and (3) mindfulness, the ability to observe the situation experienced with a broader perspective and not get caught up in negative thoughts or feelings, and accept it without judging what happens in a bad situation. The opposite is over-identification, which is a process in which someone excessively responds to a difficult event so that it leads to a negative response. This causes individuals to over-identify their thoughts and emotions.

Looking at the components of self-compassion, it can be interpreted that self-compassion can bring benefits to students' lives. Self-compassion has been shown to significantly address psychological issues related to eating behavior, rumination, stress, depression, mindfulness, self-criticism, and anxiety outcomes (Ferrari et al., 2019). Self-compassion is necessary to address symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress (Han & Kim, 2019). In general, self-compassion can promote positive mental health (Bluth & Neff, 2018). Research shows that victims of bullying tend to experience decreased levels of self-compassion due to internalizing negative labels from the perpetrator (Solihah, 2024). On the other hand, self-compassion is also necessary to cope with individuals' conditions when they are bullied by those around them and to maintain their mental health (Zhang et al., 2019; Ime, 2025). Self-compassion is even necessary to anticipate the possibility of depression in victims of bullying (Saputri et al., 2019). This is because self-compassion can mitigate the effects of bullying victimization on depression (Lian et al., 2023).

Although self-compassion is crucial for victims of bullying, many students lack it, leading to stress, depression, self-harm, and even suicide. Therefore, psychological intervention is necessary to address this issue. One approach that can be implemented is group counseling using the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) approach. ACT focuses on increasing psychological flexibility through six core processes: acceptance, defusion, present moment, self-as-context, values, and committed action (Hayes, 2012). This approach is relevant for victims of bullying because it helps individuals accept difficult internal experiences without judgment (self-kindness), recognize that suffering is part of the human experience (common humanity), and remain aware of the present moment (mindfulness). Previous research by Ardhani and Nawangsih (2020) showed that ACT is effective in reducing anxiety in victims of violence. ACT can also improve self-acceptance (Barida & Widyastuti, 2019). However, research on the effectiveness of ACT in increasing self-compassion in victims of bullying at the secondary school level still requires further study. Therefore, this research aims to test the effectiveness of ACT to increase self-compassion in students who are victims of bullying.

2. Method

This study used a quantitative method with a pre-experimental design, namely the one group pretest-posttest model. Participants in the study were six eighth-grade students at Yogyakarta, who were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on the criteria of having bullying experience and low to moderate levels of self-compassion. Measurements were carried out before and after the intervention using the Self-Compassion Scale adapted from Neff (2003) which consists of 25 valid items with a reliability of 0.804 (α -Cronbach). The intervention provided was Acceptance and Commitment group counseling for 8 meetings. Data were analyzed using a paired sample t-test using SPSS 22.0 software, after ensuring that the data met the assumption of normality.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

Researchers conducted a pretest on eighth-grade students from school at Yogyakarta. Pretest data were obtained from 43 students using a 25-item self-compassion scale. The research subjects were selected from the pretest results, which were then scored using a psychological scale, resulting in high, medium, and low categories. The categorization of these students' self-compassion levels is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Categorization of Self-Compassion Behavior Scale Results

Interval	Category	Frequency	Percentage
76 - 100	High	21	49%
51 - 75	Medium	18	42%
25 - 50	Low	4	9%
Total		43	100%

Based on the table 1, 4 students (9%) were in the low self-compassion category, 18 students (42%) were in the medium self-compassion category, and 21 students (49%) were in the high self-compassion category. Six students were selected: 4 with low self-compassion and 2 with medium self-compassion.

After conducting a pretest and determining the research subjects, the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) group counseling session was conducted eight times over a period of approximately two months. After completing the group counseling session, the researcher administered a Likert scale self-compassion questionnaire as a posttest, which was then compared with the pretest results. Table 2 present a comparison of the pretest and posttest scores.

Table 2. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Results

No	Name	Pretest		Posttest		Increase
		Score	Category	Score	Category	
1	MRA	50	Low	75	Medium	25
2	HS	59	Medium	82	High	23
3	MKK	49	Low	73	Medium	24
4	MHY	50	Low	77	High	27
5	YAA	47	Low	63	Medium	16
6	KSM	65	Medium	76	High	11
Total		320		446		126
Mean		53.33		74.33		21

Based on the table, it can be seen that there was an increase in the level of self-compassion among students who were victims of bullying from school at Yogyakarta. Before treatment, the average pretest self-compassion score was 53.33, while after treatment, the average posttest score was 74.33. Thus, the pretest and posttest results showed an increase in the average score of 21.

The next step was to conduct a hypothesis test using a paired sample t-test using SPSS 22 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences 22) software. The paired sample t-test aims to analyze the experimental results by comparing pretest and posttest scores to determine differences in levels of self-harming behavior before and after students participated in group counseling using the Acceptance and Commitment technique. Table 3 present the results of the paired sample t-test.

Table 3. Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Results

Paired Samples Test		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
PPair	PPretest - PPosttest	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
		1		-21.00000	6.16441	2.51661	-27.46916	-14.53084	-8.345

Based on the table above, it can be concluded that the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) group counseling approach has proven effective in increasing self-compassion in student victims of bullying from school at Yogyakarta, as indicated by a 2-tailed significance value of 0.000, meaning less than 0.05.

3.2. Discussion

The pretest and posttest results from the study sample showed a significant difference, with the posttest score being lower than the pretest score. This indicates that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy group counseling is effective in increasing self-compassion in student victims of bullying from school at Yogyakarta. The average pretest score was 53.33, while the posttest score was 74.33, reflecting an increase in self-compassion with an average difference of 21 points after the counseling implementation. In addition to comparing the pretest and posttest results, the researchers conducted a hypothesis test, which yielded a significance value of 0.000, less than 0.05, indicating that Ho is rejected and Ha is accepted. So it can be concluded that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy group counseling has proven effective in increasing self-compassion of students who are victims of bullying at Yogyakarta.

The ACT process includes eight sessions of group counseling activities, starting from the beginning stage, working stage, and termination stage. Group counseling has been shown to provide comfort and strengthen self-compassion. According to Corey (2016), group counseling is a service designed to assist individuals in preventing or resolving personal, social, academic, and career problems, with an emphasis on interpersonal interactions and current situations. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a psychotherapy approach based on Contextual Behavioral Science that aims to increase psychological flexibility (Hayes, 2012). In a group context, ACT helps group members become aware of the present moment, accept difficult thoughts and feelings (acceptance), recognize themselves as context (self as context), detach from negative thoughts (defusion), recognize personal values (values), and take committed action (committed action).

The integration of ACT in group counseling is expected to build a cognitive and emotional foundation for developing sustainable self-compassion in bullying victims. The stages of group counseling applied in this treatment are adapted according to Corey (2016), including: (1) Initial Stage: Group members create a comfortable atmosphere through introductions and light discussions, overcoming initial silence that can affect the continuity of the session, (2) Transition stage: Members learn to assess whether the environment allows them to express themselves and discuss problems, while adapting to the situation, (3) Working Stage: Members

begin to convey important issues and conduct in-depth exploration, with acceptance and commitment techniques that include six steps (Hayes et al., 2012): being aware of the current condition (present moment), accepting difficult thoughts and feelings (acceptance), self as context (self as context), releasing oneself from negative thoughts (defusion), realizing personal values (values), and taking committed action (committed action), and 4) Terminating Stage: Discussing problems that may not be resolved, asked to convey impressions, messages, and feelings experienced during group dynamics, as well as sharing experiences and providing feedback on what has been done. The results of this study align with the findings of Muchsin and Murdiana (2024), who concluded that group counseling services have an effect on increasing self-compassion in female victims of body shaming. Other studies have shown that implementing group counseling services is effective in improving mental well-being, increasing self-esteem, and increasing students' self-confidence (Alam, 2021; Alifah, 2025; Alisya, 2025). Implementing group counseling is an effective method for helping overcome various problems because group counseling services allow students the opportunity to discuss and resolve their problems through group dynamics. Groups can create and foster an atmosphere of mutual trust, attention, understanding, acceptance, support, and enable members to express personal problems (Alifah, 2025).

The technique used in group counseling to increase self-compassion is Acceptance and Commitment. Acceptance and commitment can help students develop self-compassion through the process of accepting painful emotional experiences, including emotional wounds caused by bullying, without judging themselves. Through Acceptance and Commitment, students are encouraged to increase self-awareness, release themselves from unhelpful negative thoughts, and commit to positive actions that align with their values. Thus, Acceptance and Commitment play a role in building self-compassion and increasing resilience in students who are victims of bullying. The effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment is proven in the findings conducted by Cahaya, Hartanti, and Karunia (2019); Dewantoro, (2019) who concluded that the acceptance and commitment approach can be influential in increasing self-efficacy in students with social anxiety and increasing self-compassion in individuals with divorced parents. Acceptance and Commitment can increase an individual's psychological flexibility, which can be achieved by helping clients accept their internal experiences, such as uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, while committing to acting in accordance with their respective personal values and principles. In this way, Acceptance and Commitment aims to reduce psychological suffering and improve quality of life (Dixon, 2023).

3.3. Implications

Most students who are victims of bullying experience deep trauma from the bullying they experience. It's difficult for victims to move on and become fully functional individuals because their self-compassion is impaired. This is because they experience irrational thoughts that others might bully them, making them less trusting of others and even lacking confidence in their own abilities. Therefore, fostering acceptance in victims of bullying is crucial. One way counselors or guidance and counseling teachers can improve self-compassion for students who are victims of bullying in Yogyakarta schools is through Acceptance and Commitment Group Counseling. Through the Acceptance and Commitment group counseling approach, self-compassion among students who are victims of bullying in Yogyakarta can be improved.

3.4. Limitations

A limitation of this research is that the intervention was only conducted with victims of bullying, not perpetrators. Furthermore, the intervention was limited to one school in Yogyakarta; therefore, to achieve resilience, the Acceptance and Commitment Group Counseling approach needs to be implemented more widely in other schools. The research design was also a pre-experiment, so a true experiment could be conducted, if possible.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results of research that has been conducted on self-compassion in students who are victims of bullying from school at Yogyakarta, there was a difference in the results of the pretest and posttest scores. The posttest score showed an increase after the implementation of Acceptance and Commitment group counseling. This increase indicates an increase in self-compassion with an average difference after the implementation of group counseling. Therefore, it can be concluded that Acceptance and Commitment group counseling is effective in increasing self-compassion in students who are victims of bullying from school at Yogyakarta.

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Data Availability

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

Declaration on AI Use

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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