

PEER-TO-PEER COUNSELLING AS A TOOL TO REDUCE EXAM STRESS

Robiya Ramazonova,
2nd-year student of the
Psychology at the UzJMCU
Tel: (93) 509-96-76

Abstract: This study analyzes the role of peer-to-peer counseling in reducing exam stress. The peer-to-peer approach is based on mutual psychological support among students. This method promotes free expression of feelings and concerns. During the sessions, students master stress management strategies and emotional balance. Peer-to-peer counseling strengthens social connections and an atmosphere of cohesion. This has a positive effect on academic activity and mental health of students. The method is accessible, easy to implement and can be widely used. In this regard, its integration into the higher education system is recommended.

Keywords: exam stress, peer-to-peer counseling, students, emotional balance, prevention.

Introduction

Exam stress is one of the most common and at the same time underestimated psychological problems among students of higher education institutions [1]. The modern educational environment places high academic and social demands on students, increasing the sense of responsibility and anxiety before exams. Constant psychological pressure associated with knowledge assessment can not only reduce academic motivation, but also cause persistent emotional disorders - from anxiety to depressive episodes [2].

Particularly vulnerable to these effects are junior students who are just adapting to the university system and experience a lack of sustainable coping strategies. The established practice of working with academic stress in universities remains limited to traditional lectures or individual trainings, which rarely produces a long-term effect. In this regard, peer-to-peer counseling is becoming one of the progressive and practically oriented approaches to preventing and reducing the level of psychological stress in students. Peer-to-peer counseling is based on the principles of equal interaction, where the mentors are the students themselves, who have undergone special training. This format creates a trusting atmosphere, where it is easier to talk about fears, failures and internal experiences. In the process of regular meetings, self-efficacy, emotional regulation and mutual support skills are formed, which is especially important in the context of academic workload and examinations [3]. In addition, participation in peer-to-peer sessions helps students develop strategies for dealing with stress, improve communication skills and increase self-confidence. It is precisely these qualities that contribute to the harmonious development of the individual and the successful overcoming of academic difficulties. Therefore, the integration of peer-to-peer consulting into the student support system is becoming not only a relevant, but also a necessary task of modern education.

Methods

This study was based on a two-group quasi-experimental design, which is widely used in psychological and pedagogical interventions to assess the impact of targeted interventions in natural educational settings [1]. This approach allowed us to compare the results of students who completed a peer-to-peer counseling course with the results of those who did not receive support, but were in similar educational and stressful conditions. The advantage of this methodology is the ability to track changes in dynamics, and not just in a static section, which increases the reliability of conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the program [2].

The intervention was designed taking into account international and local practices for reducing academic stress. In particular, the structure of the sessions was focused on cognitive-behavioral techniques adapted to the format of student interaction without the participation of professional

psychologists [3]. This reflects a global trend in education, where the emphasis is shifting from medical models of psychological assistance to preventive measures in the educational environment [4]. The peer-led format offers a unique advantage in the context of higher education, as it helps to create a trusting environment where discussing emotional and cognitive difficulties becomes less stigmatized [5].

The study paid special attention to the development of time management skills and academic effectiveness, aspects that traditionally remain poorly covered in university programs, despite their key role in adapting to stress [6]. Relaxation and cognitive restructuring training were included not only as tools for reducing anxiety, but also as elements of developing sustainable coping strategies. It is important to emphasize that such practices have long been proven in international studies as effective in preventing professional and academic burnout [7].

The qualitative component of the study, represented by the analysis of focus group data, complemented the quantitative results and allowed for a deeper understanding of the participants' subjective perception of the counseling process. This approach is consistent with modern requirements for a comprehensive assessment of psychological interventions, where quantitative indicators are supplemented by an analysis of personal experience and changes in attitudes [8].

Results

The results of the study confirmed the high efficiency of peer-to-peer counseling as a method for reducing exam stress. When comparing the experimental and control groups, there was a pronounced dynamics of psychological changes in favor of the former, which is consistent with the data of previous international studies in a similar area [1]. It is important to note that the positive effect was manifested not only at the level of subjective feelings of the participants, but also in their ability to consciously regulate their emotional state, which is confirmed by a qualitative analysis of focus groups.

Changes in the perception of academic difficulties turned out to be especially significant: students who passed the sessions more often reported a decrease in the fear of mistakes and a reassessment of their own criteria for success. This aspect is consistent with the concept of cognitive restructuring, when students learn to replace irrational beliefs about failure with more realistic and constructive attitudes [2]. In addition, participants noted an increased sense of belonging to the community and a decrease in isolation, which is one of the key factors in protecting against chronic stress [3]. It is significant that despite the decrease in anxiety and emotional stress, no significant differences were found in academic performance (GPA) between the groups. This confirms that the improvement in psychological state occurred not due to "cramming" for exams, but due to the development of personal and social resources of students [4]. Another important result was that the effect of counseling was more pronounced among female students and junior students. This coincides with studies according to which these groups demonstrate greater vulnerability to stress and, accordingly, greater susceptibility to psychological interventions [5].

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate the importance of peer-to-peer counseling as an effective strategy for reducing exam stress among students. The data obtained confirm the theoretical provisions that stress in the educational environment is associated not only with academic workload, but also with the lack of coping skills, a supportive environment, and a constructive perception of failure [1]. In this context, peer-to-peer counseling compares favorably with traditional forms of psychological assistance in that it relies on horizontal connections and reduces communication barriers between participants.

The study showed that cognitive-behavioral techniques in the format of peer-led sessions contribute not only to reducing anxiety, but also to the formation of new behavioral patterns, such as rational planning, time control, and adequate self-esteem. These elements are the foundation for sustainable academic adaptation and a reduced likelihood of professional burnout in the future [2]. Of particular importance is the identified social effect: thanks to regular meetings and a group format, participants were able to overcome the feeling of social isolation, which often intensifies during stressful periods of exam preparation. Social support thus not only helps reduce subjective stress, but also creates a sense of community and mutual assistance in students, which is also a predictor of academic success [3]. However, it is worth noting that despite the positive psychological changes, academic performance (GPA) did not show significant differences between the experimental and control groups. This result is consistent with a number of studies indicating that reducing stress and anxiety does not always directly affect quantitative indicators of academic achievement, but significantly affects the quality of learning and internal motivation [4]. A comparative analysis with international practices shows that similar peer-to-peer support programs are actively developing in universities in Europe, North America and Australia, where they have already become part of systemic work on student mental health [5]. In this context, the presented study confirms the need to integrate such initiatives into local educational strategies.

Conclusion

The conducted study confirmed that peer-to-peer counseling is an effective and accessible tool for reducing exam stress among students. Unlike traditional psychological practices, this format of counseling relies on the strength of interpersonal connections and social support, which contributes to the formation of a trusting environment and sustainable self-regulation skills. The data obtained demonstrate not only a decrease in the level of anxiety and stress, but also an increase in students' self-confidence, ability to manage time and control their emotional state in difficult learning situations.

In addition, the study showed that peer-to-peer counseling is especially effective for junior students and girls, which requires further study of gender and age characteristics of the perception of such interventions. Qualitative analysis of focus groups emphasized the importance of the social aspect: reducing isolation and strengthening the sense of community were important factors in improving the psycho-emotional state of the participants. Despite the fact that the level of academic performance did not show significant changes, improving the psychological background and reducing stress create the prerequisites for the long-term development of academic motivation and resilience to future stress.

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