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Mindfulness-Based Group Counseling and Its Role in Managing Students' Academic Stress

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the dynamics of mindfulness-based group counseling in managing academic stress among students. Academic stress is understood as a psychological response to various academic demands, including achievement pressure, parental expectations, peer competition, and learning-related fatigue. This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. The participants were students experiencing academic stress who took part in mindfulness-based group counseling sessions. The counseling process was conducted across multiple sessions integrating mindfulness techniques such as deep breathing, guided imagery, and progressive muscle relaxation. Data were collected through observation, students' reflective responses, and documentation, and were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that mindfulness-based group counseling promotes positive dynamics in managing academic stress, as evidenced by increased self-awareness of stress sources, reduced physical and emotional tension, and enhanced emotional regulation skills. Furthermore, group interactions provided students with social support and facilitated the construction of new meanings regarding their academic stress experiences. These results suggest that mindfulness-based group counseling constitutes a relevant and contextually appropriate guidance and counseling service for supporting students in managing academic stress within school settings.

Kata Kunci:

Konseling Kelompok; Mindfulness; Stres Akademik; Peserta Didik.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan dinamika pelaksanaan konseling kelompok berbasis mindfulness dalam pengelolaan stres akademik pada peserta didik. Stres akademik pada peserta didik muncul sebagai respons terhadap berbagai tuntutan akademik, seperti tekanan pencapaian prestasi, ekspektasi orang tua, persaingan dengan teman sebaya, serta kejenuhan dalam proses pembelajaran. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain deskriptif. Subjek penelitian adalah peserta didik yang mengalami stres akademik dan mengikuti layanan konseling kelompok berbasis mindfulness. Proses konseling dilaksanakan dalam beberapa sesi dengan mengintegrasikan teknik mindfulness, meliputi deep breathing, guided imagery, dan progressive muscle relaxation. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui

observasi, refleksi peserta didik, dan dokumentasi kegiatan, sedangkan analisis data menggunakan model interaktif Miles dan Huberman yang mencakup reduksi data, penyajian data, serta penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa konseling kelompok berbasis mindfulness menghadirkan dinamika positif dalam proses pengelolaan stres akademik, ditandai dengan meningkatnya kesadaran diri peserta didik terhadap sumber stres, berkurangnya ketegangan fisik dan emosional, serta berkembangnya kemampuan regulasi emosi. Selain itu, interaksi dalam kelompok memungkinkan peserta didik memperoleh dukungan sosial dan pemaknaan baru terhadap pengalaman stres akademik yang dialami. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa konseling kelompok berbasis mindfulness dapat menjadi alternatif layanan bimbingan dan konseling yang relevan dan kontekstual dalam membantu peserta didik mengelola stres akademik di lingkungan sekolah.

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INTRODUCTION

Academic stress is a common psychological phenomenon experienced by students, particularly those in secondary education. It occurs when academic demands exceed an individual's capacity to cope effectively, thereby affecting emotional, physical, and behavioral well-being. According to Desmita (2010), academic stress refers to stress arising from academic-related stressors. These stressors encompass various aspects of the learning process, including pressure to advance to higher grade levels, prolonged study hours, excessive academic workload, high expectations for academic achievement, demands for outstanding grades, decisions related to academic majors or career paths, examination anxiety, and inadequate stress management skills.

According to Gadzella (as cited in Gadzella & Masten, 2005), academic stress refers to an individual's perception of academic stressors and their responses to these stressors, encompassing physical, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive reactions. Lin and Chen (2009) suggested that academic stress arises from interactions between teachers and students, anxiety related to academic outcomes, examinations, collaborative learning processes, peer influence in learning, time management skills, and students' perceptions of their own learning abilities, all of which may affect academic performance.

Academic stress refers to psychological pressure or tension arising from academic demands within educational settings. It commonly emerges when students face challenges related to academic achievement, such as classroom performance, examination results, time management between academic and extracurricular activities, timely completion of studies, and preparation for post-graduation life (Suresh Prabu, 2015; Ilhamsyah et al., 2023). In line with this, Bariyyah (2013) and Rahmawati (2017) define academic stress as students' responses to various demands originating from the teaching and learning process, including pressure for grade promotion, excessive academic workload, expectations for high academic achievement, pressure in selecting an academic major, examination anxiety, and the need for effective study time management. When these demands are perceived as overwhelming or difficult to manage, students may experience

disturbances in psychological well-being, decreased learning motivation, and difficulties in social relationships.

This phenomenon of academic stress is also evident at MA Al Falah Jatilawang, as indicated by complaints from several tenth-grade students during learning activities. The students reported that academic pressure stemmed from high parental expectations regarding academic achievement, internal demands to consistently perform optimally, and dissatisfaction with their learning outcomes. Social factors further exacerbated this condition, including negative comments from peers, discomfort with prolonged learning sessions, dissatisfaction with certain teachers' instructional styles, and feelings of boredom during the learning process. These findings are consistent with Lin and Chen (2009), who argued that academic stress emerges from interactions between teachers and students (Sriwahyuningsih & Barseli, 2024). If academic stress is not addressed appropriately, students may experience concentration difficulties, decreased learning motivation, heightened anxiety, and a tendency to withdraw from social environments.

Therefore, schools need to provide effective counseling services to assist students in identifying the sources of their academic stress and developing healthier coping strategies. One approach that has been widely recognized as relevant is mindfulness. Kabat-Zinn (2012) defines mindfulness as awareness that arises from paying deliberate attention to the present moment without judgment. Mindfulness practices support individuals in enhancing self-awareness, regulating mental energy, and recognizing the dynamic relationship between the self and the surrounding environment. Furthermore, Tsabary (2017) emphasized that mindfulness functions as a psychological strength that enables individuals to recover from psychological instability and develop resilience (Wicaksono et al., 2022).

To optimize the application of mindfulness within the school context, group counseling was selected as the intervention approach. Through group dynamics, students can obtain social support, opportunities to share experiences, and engage in collective reflection. Corey (2016) emphasized that group interactions enhance empathy, self-understanding, and interpersonal awareness. Mindfulness techniques, including deep breathing, guided imagery, and progressive muscle relaxation, can assist students in managing academic stress more adaptively. Based on these considerations, this study aims to describe the dynamics of mindfulness-based group counseling services in reducing academic stress among tenth-grade students at MA Al Falah Jatilawang. The integration of mindfulness practices with group dynamics is expected to contribute to the development of school-based guidance and counseling services, particularly in supporting students' mental health and academic functioning.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach because it focuses on the implementation process of mindfulness-based group counseling services and the changes experienced by students after participating in the intervention. The qualitative approach allows researchers to describe phenomena in depth according to natural conditions in the field, emphasizing process, meaning, and participant experiences (Agustina, 2019). Through this approach, the study aims to capture how mindfulness techniques are applied in group counseling and how these techniques influence students' academic stress.

The participants in this study were eight tenth-grade students at MA Al Falah Jatilawang who exhibited symptoms of academic stress, identified through initial observations and direct feedback from students. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the relevance of their problems to the counseling services provided. The research was conducted in Classroom X-2 at MA Al Falah Jatilawang, which served as the setting for all group counseling sessions and provided

a structured and conducive environment for the implementation of mindfulness-based interventions.

The group counseling services were conducted in six structured sessions, beginning with group formation and ending with evaluation and closure. Each session integrated mindfulness techniques, including deep breathing, guided imagery, and progressive muscle relaxation training (PMRT). The sessions began with an introduction and the establishment of a safe and supportive group atmosphere, followed by the identification of participants' academic stress. Subsequent sessions focused on practicing deep breathing to reduce anxiety, guided imagery to alleviate mental burden and academic overthinking, and PMRT to increase awareness of physical tension related to stress. The intervention also emphasized the integration of mindfulness and self-awareness, encouraging participants to explore the sources of their stress, accept their emotions without judgment, and develop more adaptive coping strategies. The final session involved evaluation and reflection, during which participants assessed the changes they experienced and made personal commitments to apply mindfulness practices in their daily lives.

Data were collected using participant observation, field notes, and participant reflections. The researcher was directly involved in the counseling process to observe participants' behaviors, emotional responses, and group dynamics. Field notes were used to document participants' reactions, progress in each session, and important findings throughout the intervention. In addition, participants were asked to share their experiences and perceived changes either in written form or verbally after participating in the mindfulness training. This data collection approach is consistent with counseling service research, which prioritizes understanding processes and behavioral changes in participants (Sugiyono, 2016).

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting and focusing relevant information related to the research objectives, such as identifying forms of academic stress, mapping contributing factors, documenting participant changes, and assessing responses to mindfulness techniques. The reduced data were then presented in narrative descriptions of participant development, tables showing changes across sessions, and explanations of participant responses to mindfulness practices, including deep breathing, guided imagery, and PMRT. Finally, conclusions were drawn after consistent patterns emerged across the analyzed data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The mindfulness-based group counseling intervention in this study was conducted over six sessions, with each session tailored to help students cope with and manage academic stress. Each session was designed with specific objectives, structured activities, and different mindfulness techniques, allowing participants to experience progressive learning in understanding and regulating their stress responses. Overall, the outcomes of the intervention indicated notable positive changes in participants' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains, which were observed from the first to the final session.

1. Session 1, Group Formation and Identification of Issues

The first session commenced with group formation, participant introductions, and the establishment of a safe and supportive atmosphere to encourage openness in sharing personal experiences. This activity was essential for building trust among group members, enabling participants to express their feelings and stress experiences without fear of judgment.

During this stage, participants disclosed various forms of academic stress, including parental pressure to achieve high grades, excessive self-expectations and fear of disappointing others,

negative comments from peers, physical discomfort from prolonged periods of study, dissatisfaction with certain teachers' instructional styles, and boredom due to a heavy assignment load. These accounts indicate that the participants' academic stress stemmed from a combination of personal, social, and academic factors.

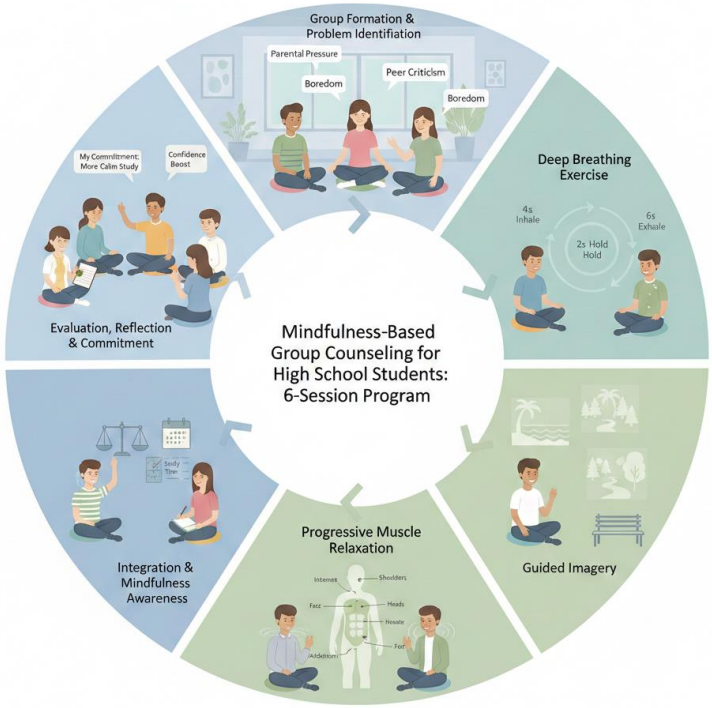


Figure 1. Mindfulness in 6 Session. Source: AI Generated.

These findings align with Gadzella and Masten (2005), who asserted that academic stress comprises physiological, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses arising from pressure within the learning process. The session concluded with a brief mindfulness exercise focused on breathing awareness, which served as an introductory technique for calming the mind and body. Participants' reflections indicated that most felt calmer, more comfortable, and better able to focus even after this short practice.

2. Session 2, Deep Breathing for Anxiety Management

The second session focused on introducing deep breathing as a mindfulness technique that has been shown to be effective in reducing anxiety and promoting relaxation. Participants were instructed to follow a structured breathing pattern: inhaling for four seconds, holding the breath for two seconds, and exhaling for six seconds. During the exercise, participants appeared more focused and followed the instructions effectively. Their reflections revealed positive subjective experiences, such as feeling lighter-headed, calmer, and more able to concentrate.

These findings suggest that deep breathing helps reduce physiological stress responses and enhances self-regulation. This is consistent with the findings of Salmon et al. (2004), who emphasized that breathing exercises can reduce anxiety, improve oxygen flow to the brain, and promote mental calmness, thereby enabling participants to face academic demands with greater emotional stability.

3. Session 3, Guided Imagery for Alleviating Cognitive Overload

In the third session, participants were introduced to the guided imagery technique, which involves mentally visualizing a calming environment or scenario, such as a beach, park, or natural landscape. Participants were instructed to close their eyes, imagine the details of the setting, and experience the sense of tranquility created. Observations indicated that this technique led to clearer thinking, a sense of relief, and a reduced preoccupation with grades or academic assignments.

Several participants reported that guided imagery contributed to greater self-acceptance, reduced fear of failure, and increased optimism regarding the learning process. These findings align with Bedoe and Murphy (2004), who stated that guided imagery effectively reduces stress through deep mental relaxation, helps individuals focus on positive experiences, and prepares the mind to face challenges more adaptively.

4. Session 4, Progressive Muscle Relaxation Training (PMRT)

The fourth session focused on Progressive Muscle Relaxation Training (PMRT), a gradual muscle relaxation exercise that progresses from the facial muscles to the shoulders, hands, abdomen, and feet. The exercise aimed to enhance bodily awareness, enabling participants to distinguish between tense and relaxed muscle states. Observations indicated that participants noticed previously unnoticed physical tension; some reported feeling lighter in their bodies, while others acknowledged frequently tensing their shoulders or clenching their hands when experiencing anxiety.

This technique helped participants understand that academic stress not only affects the mind but also manifests as physical tension. With this awareness, participants were better able to respond to stress adaptively through body relaxation. These findings are consistent with Baer et al. (2008), who emphasized that body awareness is an indicator of increased mindfulness and can enhance an individual's ability to manage stress.

5. Session 5, Enhancing Mindfulness and Stress Management

In the fifth session, participants integrated all previously learned mindfulness techniques. They reviewed various stressors they encountered, such as grade pressure, increasing academic workload, parental expectations, negative peer comments, and study-related boredom.

Participants were introduced to mindful awareness, which involves observing thoughts and emotions without judgment, accepting the situation as it is, and using deep breathing to calm themselves when stress arises. Observations indicated that participants began to differentiate between stress originating from internal factors and stress stemming from their environment, enabling them to develop healthier and more adaptive coping strategies. This technique also enhanced self-awareness and helped participants prioritize learning and manage their time more effectively essential skills for coping with high academic demands.

6. Session 5, Evaluation, Reflection, and Commitment to Personal Change

The final session focused on evaluating the changes that occurred throughout the six sessions. Participants reported reduced academic stress, clearer thinking, more stable emotions, improved time management for studying, and slightly enhanced social relationships as they became calmer and more self-regulated. Furthermore, participants expressed personal commitments to maintaining these changes, such as studying consistently at a slower pace, being less self-critical, practicing breathing exercises when feeling anxious, and minimizing the impact of negative peer comments. These reported changes were consistent with observational data collected during the intervention, suggesting that the benefits of mindfulness are sustainable and applicable to participants' daily live.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that mindfulness-based group counseling services significantly contribute to the reduction of students' academic stress and the enhancement of self-awareness, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping strategies. Several key points are outlined below:

1. The Role of Group Dynamics in the Counseling Process

Participants' involvement in the group fostered a sense of community and social support, enabling them to feel heard and understood. This is consistent with Corey (2016), who emphasized

that group settings can function as therapeutic spaces that facilitate personal growth, enhanced empathy, and self-understanding through interpersonal interactions. Additionally, groups provided participants with opportunities to observe others' experiences, learn from peers' coping strategies, and increase motivation and confidence in confronting academic stress.

2. The Effectiveness of Mindfulness-Based Techniques

The mindfulness techniques employed in this study, including deep breathing, guided imagery, and progressive muscle relaxation training (PMRT), were found to effectively reduce physical tension, alleviate anxiety, and enhance participants' emotional regulation. Deep breathing contributed to calming the autonomic nervous system, guided imagery facilitated mental stress relief through calming visualization, and PMRT increased bodily awareness and promoted physical relaxation. These findings are consistent with the work of Kabat-Zinn (2013) and Bedoe and Murphy (2004), who posited that mindfulness enhances self-awareness, self-acceptance, and the ability to cope adaptively with stress.

3. Integration of Mindfulness in Emotional Adaptation

After several sessions, participants demonstrated the ability to independently apply mindfulness strategies in response to academic stress. Mindfulness enabled participants to remain focused on the present moment, reduce rumination on negative thoughts, respond adaptively to stress, and enhance self-regulation (Brown & Ryan, 2003). These findings suggest that mindfulness not only provides short-term relaxation but also cultivates enduring emotional competencies.

4. Consistency of Changes Through the Final Session

Participant reflections indicate that the benefits of mindfulness are not only temporary but also impact mindsets, exam readiness, emotional management, self-confidence, and daily study behavior. Participants began to be able to set realistic study goals, prioritize tasks, and deal with academic pressure more calmly.

Mindfulness-based group counseling services proved effective in helping participants manage academic stress, increase self-awareness, and develop healthier and more adaptive coping strategies. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that mindfulness-based group counseling interventions can be an effective approach for schools and educational institutions to support students' mental well-being, reduce academic stress, and develop long-term emotional skills.

CONCLUSION

Based on the six-session mindfulness-based group counseling intervention, several conclusions can be drawn regarding its impact on academic stress and students' psychological well-being. First, the intervention effectively reduced students' academic stress across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Participants reported improved stress management, reduced anxiety, and enhanced focus and concentration, as reflected in their reflections after each session. Second, the mindfulness techniques employed breathing awareness, deep breathing, guided imagery, and progressive muscle relaxation provided complementary benefits. Breathing exercises facilitated physiological calming, guided imagery supported mental relaxation and self-acceptance, and PMRT enhanced bodily awareness and tension release. Together, these techniques contributed to improved self-regulation and adaptive coping skills. Third, group dynamics played a pivotal role in the intervention's effectiveness. Participation in the group fostered social support, empathy, and a sense of shared experience, enabling students to learn coping strategies from peers and feel less isolated in facing academic pressure. Fourth, the intervention produced sustained benefits beyond immediate relaxation. Participants reported increased ability to differentiate between personal and environmental stressors, adopt more adaptive responses, and form commitments to maintain well-being, such as effective time management and regular practice of relaxation techniques.

Finally, this study has practical implications for educational practice and counseling services. Schools may consider implementing mindfulness-based group counseling as a feasible and effective strategy to support students' mental health, reduce academic stress, and enhance resilience through both mindfulness skills and peer support. In conclusion, mindfulness-based group counseling appears to be a comprehensive and relevant approach for promoting students' psychological well-being, fostering adaptive coping strategies, and supporting their academic and social development.

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