

THE EFFECTS OF LOGOTHERAPY ON THE DEPRESSION LEVEL OF SELECTED FRESHMAN COLLEGE STUDENTS OF COLEGIO DE SAN JUAN DE LETRAN

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ABSTRACT

Logotherapy emphasizes that meaning exists in all circumstances. Finding meaning is complex and is found in the individual's confrontation with the challenges of the world. How can adolescents find orientation and meaning in the midst of conditions and suffering, particularly in depression? The objective of this study is to determine the effects of a meaning-centered approach to therapy on the depression experienced by adolescent freshmen of Colegio de San Juan de Letran. Because of the seriousness of adolescent depression, adolescents perceive that life is devoid of meaning, they often feel confused and conflicted about what they should be doing and whom they can trust, combined with the conflicting demands of parents and peers, and environmental struggles in the society. To address these concerns, logotherapy was applied to a number of depressed adolescent freshmen presently enrolled in Colegio de San Juan de Letran. This approach would encourage adolescents to face difficult challenges while trying to make sense out of suffering. This study utilized the pretest/posttest control group design to compare measurements made before, and after the application of logotherapy. The logotherapy program is based on Frankl's (1984) therapeutic techniques and methods. Results reveal both quantitative and qualitative parts of this study, which point towards the fact that finding and pursuit of a worthy meaning lessens depression significantly and symptoms dissipate; thus, results imply an empowering effect towards recovery.

Key Words: Depression, Adolescent Depression, Existential Vacuum, Logotherapy, Freedom of Will, Will to Meaning, Meaning of Life

INTRODUCTION

Depression is a phenomenon confronting people in the counseling practice from day to day. Apparently, meaninglessness is a major factor affecting the young people towards the development of depression. The World Health Organization identified depression as a leading cause of disability worldwide, and it currently ranks as the fourth highest; by the year 2020, it is expected to be the second highest cause of disability in the world (Fotiades and Sherman, 2002).

In an epidemiological study in the United States conducted by Kashami JH and Sherman DD (1988), they claimed that it is often during adolescence that depression first manifests itself and is estimated that 4.7% of the teenage population suffers from this mental disorder. It was long believed that the tumultuous moods of the teenage years were "normal", but we now understand that excessive irritability, moodiness, sleep and appetite change may signal a vulnerability to depression (<http://www.emedicine.com>). Common symptoms of adolescent depression are irritability, hopelessness, anhedonia, changes in sleep and appetite, academic decline, reduced energy and social interactions, somatic symptoms, and suicidal ideation or thoughts (Pine et al. 1999).

There are several factors affecting adolescents towards the development of depression. These risks would include the increase in hormones associated with puberty and changes in body shape and emerging sexual identity in girls, poor family relationships, negative life events, peer pressure, poor self-concept and lack of social support. Separation associated with leaving for college is another stressor, which may predispose the older adolescent to depression (Pine et al. 1999). It is estimated that depression affects as many as one in every 33 children and one in eight adolescents worldwide (<http://www.med.umich.edu>, 2005). An adolescent who is usually sad and unable to enjoy things or activities that would normally be pleasurable to teenagers of his/her age, might be suffering from a depressive disorder.

Of the various approaches to psychotherapy, one existential theory, particularly logotherapy, was examined to address the depression experienced by these adolescents who view their situation to be meaningless.

Facilitating this search for meaning in one's life is the goal of Frankl's logotherapy. In logotherapy, Frankl (1988) stresses the importance of helping

the individual find an aim and purpose in his existence. It seeks to help the individual experience life as real, and consciously accept responsibility so that he can act upon his potentialities and transcend his condition. Even the tragic and negative aspects of life, such as unavoidable suffering, can be turned into a human achievement by certain attitudes, which a man adopts toward his predicament (Frankl, 1984). In Logotherapy, man is viewed not only as a psychosocial and biological being, but a spiritual being as well. Unlike in other early personality theories, wherein man is reduced as pleasure-seeking creatures and later as individuals who continually strive for superiority and autonomy, man is reified as meaning-seeking individuals able to transcend challenges as an act of faith based from a personal belief and value system unique only to the individual. In essence, in logotherapy, meaning is central to emotional healing and well-being of the spirit, the mind, and the body.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

1. *Sample / Data Collection*

The respondents for the study were bona fide freshmen students of Colegio de San Juan de Letran presently enrolled in School-Year 2006-2007. The age ranges from fifteen to nineteen years (adolescence). The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) and the depression scale of the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS) were administered to all first year students in the collegiate level. Out of 989 freshmen, 30 respondents have test results implicating a moderate to severe level of depression. They were equally distributed through random assignment to experimental and control groups, fifteen (15) participants per group.

2. *Research Instrument*

The researcher made use of three (3) instruments in order to gather relevant data and information necessary for the completion of the research. The following instruments were utilized in this study:

Beck Depression Inventory

The researcher utilized the Beck Depression Inventory to measure the presence and degree of depression in adolescents. Further, assess specific

symptoms and attitude, which appear to be specific to the adolescent. The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) is a series of questions developed to measure the intensity, severity, and depth of depression in patients (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The form is composed of 21 questions, each designed to assess a specific symptom common among people with depression. Aaron T. Beck, a pioneer in cognitive therapy, first designed the BDI.

Depression Anxiety Stress Scales

The Depression Anxiety Stress Scales 42 (DASS, 1995) downloadable form and manual is a set of three self-report scales designed to measure the negative emotional states of depression, anxiety and stress. The researcher utilized the depression scale of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS) as a standardized tool of identifying people with depressive problems. Primarily, it will serve as supporting tool that will verify the depression level of adolescents from the findings derived from the test results of BDI.

Logotherapy Program

The participants went through five phases anchored on Frankl's (1984) theories and techniques, and patterned on Robert Blair's (2004) treatment method:

Establishing the therapeutic relationship (first phase, sessions 1-2) refers to efforts of establishing an environment that will focus on the adolescent's experience of problems and difficulties. This will also facilitate elaboration and articulation of the adolescent's struggles.

Increasing insight regarding values and goals (second phase, sessions 3-4), as the therapeutic relationship develops, the participant will feel more understood and consequently, becomes more willing to risk personal exploration and sharing. As the therapist probes the experiences shared, the participant will gain insight about experiences and perceptions influencing meaning.

Reframing depression (third phase, sessions 5-7), as struggles are expressed and explored, the participant will be more willing to accept the therapist's role to develop a mutually acceptable perspective of suffering. It facilitated the administration of Viktor Frankl's classical methods such as

Dereflection, Socratic dialogue, and Parable method.

Discovering meaning within the depression (fourth phase, sessions 8-9) places its emphasis on "faith" and responsibility to discover and pursue meaning. This will promote a search for meaning in depression through a close self-examination with the help of the therapist.

Pursuing the fulfillment of meaning (fifth phase, session 10) refers to identifying steps needed to move from a current position to the fulfillment of meaning.

3. *Data Analysis*

The Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test was used to determine the significant difference between the pretest and the posttest results, and the significant difference between the posttest and the extended posttest results. On the other hand, the Mann-Whitney *U*-Test was used to identify the significant difference between the pretest results of the experimental and control groups, and the significant difference between the posttest results of the experimental and control groups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The symptoms of depression are evidently characteristic of each adolescent in the experimental and control group. Apparently, these are rooted from existential concerns based from test findings and conducted therapeutic/treatment sessions. The existential crisis and confrontation during adolescence produces depression according to Bugental and Cruscosa (1989). He contends that depression is a last attempt to hold on to the defenses against anxiety as well as being a natural reaction to a lack of meaning in life.

Findings indicate that at the start of the experimental study or prior to the administration of logotherapy the participants of the experimental and control groups were comparable in their level of depression, which is relatively of high level. This is line with Frankl's theory on the existential vacuum experience. According to Frankl (1986), in the modern era, one of the pervasive crises of the young generation is the feeling of emptiness and lack of meaning. He labels this crisis an existential vacuum.

Feeling of meaninglessness, individuals may resolve to

maladaptive patterns of behavior that will fill the void experience with temporary satisfaction (e.g. seek power, excessive eating, and promiscuous sex, destroy people who may be a potential threat). In such manner, this will lead adolescents vulnerable to symptoms of depression and other emotional and behavioral problems.

Presently, the transitional period of advance technology and modern living, various political resistance movements throughout history and in the present time, the energy shortage, the staggering suicide figures in typical welfare states, and the incidence of mass terrorism. These factors create an ultimate nihilism or skepticism over the apparent meaninglessness of life in the modern society. Thus, meaninglessness is not only an issue affecting the young generation but also people from all walks of life.

On the other hand, results of significant difference between the posttest scores (BDI and DASS) of the participants when grouped according to experimental and control reveal that behavioral differences between the two groups of subjects already exist. There is strong evidence that logotherapy altered the behavior of the subjects in the experimental group during the experimental and post-experimental stage of this study.

Analysis of the results implies that the administration of the logotherapy program was able to significantly lessen the depression experienced by the adolescents in the experimental group, which are in line with the objectives of the researcher, to ascertain the effectiveness of a meaning-centered approach to therapy in alleviating adolescent depression.

In this study, alleviating adolescent depression can be attributed to a number of distinct causes centralized on logotherapeutic procedures. Initially, the adolescents feelings of emptiness, sense of meaninglessness, lack of purpose and aim, and inability to adhere to certain values associated with their identity, combined with the experience of environmental struggles and pressure, and interpersonal problems (Boeree, 2006; Erickson, 1968) contributed greatly in developing a negative schema or pattern of thinking and unusual behavior in response to these experiences. The application of logotherapy, however, provided an opportunity for adolescents to view depression in a different light, by broadening their concept of freedom and responsibility, and recognize suffering as a necessary part of human experience (Krill, 1996). This result is in line with Frankl's work that the application of a proper psychotherapeutic technique of logotherapy conceptualizes systematically the perspective of

meaning. And finding meaning as a motivational factor equips the individual to endure life's difficulties on the basis that suffering holds meaning.

During the administration of the logotherapy intervention, the subjects were encouraged to familiarize themselves with the difficult situation and its accompanying problem in relation to their depressive symptoms. They were consistently guided to search for the cause and determine its sources through appropriate dialogue, likewise, discover personal identity and value system, which includes discovery of strengths and talents. As they gain existential awareness from the intervention, they become more motivated to realize individual and unique meanings to fulfill.

Concurring, Corey (2001) stated that individuals benefit significantly from logotherapy by man's capacity to reflect and make choices. The greater the awareness the more alternatives are opened to overcome struggles. Thus, the individual has a larger role in shaping one's destiny. The manner of how an individual lives and what he or she becomes are the results of personal choices. However, meaning is not something that we can directly search for or cannot be given arbitrarily, it must be found responsibly, or a by-product of engagement, a commitment to create, love, work, and build.

According to Robert G. Blair (2004), logotherapy for depressed older adolescents can be empowering because it puts the responsibility of understanding and learning from depression on the adolescent. And as Frankl stated, it is the individual who has to decide whether he/she interprets responsibility in terms of being responsible to humanity, society, conscience, or God. It is up to the individual to decide to what, to whom, and for what he/she is responsible.

Furthermore, in support of these findings, Brown and Romanchuk (1994) posit that, as individuals, we are in the "process of becoming and can be assisted in finding meaning in life and with assistance may move to a higher level of authenticity" (p. 51). Additionally, as the meaning of depression is identified and pursued, adolescents often gain understanding regarding their values, unique nature, and the current meaning of their lives.

An individual has the ability to understand and eventually eliminate dysfunctional thinking patterns of negative views about how one interprets experiences in relation to the self, the world and the future. Thus, the focus is to shift one's attention off the depressive thoughts and conditions, further

empowering the client in the active pursuit of meaning potentials resulting frequently in a dissipation of depressive symptoms (Blair, 2004).

The adolescent is confronted by ultimate concerns rather than coping with immediate problems. They are assisted to identify and clarify certain assumptions about the world and they are invited to define and question the ways in which they perceive and make sense of their existence (Corey, 2005).

The goal is for the adolescent to think deeply about his/her attitude to life and carefully examine his/her role in creating problems in living. With this renewing process, better insights, and new structures of values and attitude reformation inevitably takes place. Thus, adolescents develop new ideas and vision of how to live their life with a clearer sense of greater purpose and good values. Lastly, this will allow implementation of internalized values and find better ways of putting into action what they have learned and realized.

On the other hand, the control or no condition group did not cause an effect because the depression experienced by the subjects were not processed and left untreated; thus, the depression level of the participants in the control group remains stable.

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