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Original Article

Effects of Positive Psychology Training on Self-Efficacy and Quality of Academic Life in Students with a Parental Death Experience

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Abstract

Background: Students who have lost a parent often experience low levels of self-efficacy and quality of academic life due to the psychological distress caused by this loss.

Objectives: The study aimed to determine if positive psychology training could improve the self-efficacy and academic performance of students who had lost a parent.

Methods: This quasi-experimental research adopted a pretest-posttest design with a two-month follow-up. The study focused on female senior high school students in Ahvaz, Iran, who had lost a parent in 2022. Forty eligible students were selected through purposive sampling and then randomly assigned to either an experimental group or a control group. The participants in the experimental group received a ten-week positive psychology training intervention, consisting of weekly 90-minute sessions. The control group served as a no-intervention comparison group. The research data, collected using questionnaires on self-efficacy and quality of academic life, were analyzed using a repeated measures ANOVA in SPSS-23.

Results: The results showed that positive psychology training significantly affected the self-efficacy and quality of academic life in participants ($P<0.001$). The positive psychology group exhibited significantly higher mean post-test scores on both self-efficacy (83.90 ± 7.56) and quality of academic life (146.40 ± 10.64) compared to the control group (45.20 ± 5.35 and 101.05 ± 6.88, respectively).

Conclusion: The study found that positive psychology training can significantly improve the self-efficacy and quality of academic life of students who have experienced the loss of a parent. This suggests that such interventions could be beneficial for supporting the overall well-being and academic success of these students.

Keywords: Positive Psychology, Self-Efficacy, Quality of Life, Students

1. Background

The loss of a loved one, particularly a parent, is a deeply traumatic event that can have profound and lasting consequences for individuals.[1] While the terms "bereavement" and "grief" are often used interchangeably, it is important to distinguish between them. Bereavement refers to the state of loss itself, while grief is the emotional response to that loss. Grief is a complex process that can involve a wide range of physical, psychological, and behavioral reactions.[2,3] For students who have experienced the loss of a parent, this grief can disrupt their social, occupational, and academic lives, leading to a range of psychosocial disorders, emotional distress, and functional impairments.[4,5] The death of a parent can significantly impact a student's self-perception and self-efficacy. Self-views can profoundly influence behavior and lifestyle, and students who have experienced such a loss may struggle to accurately assess their own abilities. These self-perceptions can, in turn, affect their academic performance, social interactions, and overall well-being.[6]

Self-efficacy, a person's belief in their ability to influence outcomes, is a critical factor in managing stress and coping with adversity.[7,8] For individuals experiencing bereavement, high self-efficacy has been linked to reduced emotional distress, improved psychological and spiritual well-being, and better physical health.[9] In particular, self-efficacy can help students who have lost a parent to mitigate the symptoms of grief and navigate the challenges associated with their traumatic experience.[10]

Studies have shown that parents can significantly influence the academic performance and well-being of students at all ages.[12,13] The loss of a parent can therefore have a detrimental impact on a student's academic life. Quality of life is a multifaceted construct encompassing physical, emotional, social, and psychological dimensions, shaped by an individual's personality and life experiences.[13] The term "quality of life" reflects both the positive and negative aspects of life, and it is a crucial indicator of

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individual and societal well-being.[14,15] Quality of academic life is a specific dimension of quality of life that refers to a student's overall satisfaction and well-being in relation to their educational experiences. It encompasses both positive and negative aspects of school life, and it is a vital factor in students' academic success.[16-18] Research has demonstrated that students who have lost a parent often experience low levels of self-efficacy and quality of academic life due to the psychological distress associated with bereavement.[19] These students may benefit from interventions that address the negative effects of such events. Positive psychology, with its focus on promoting well-being and resilience, has emerged as a promising approach for supporting students facing these challenges.

Positive psychology is a branch of psychology that focuses on people's successful development rather than the treatment of mental illness.[20] The studies of positive psychology fall into four major categories: 1) positive emotions and their effects on psychological and physical performance, 2) positive individual traits and their protective role against various mental and physical disorders, 3) positive interpersonal relationships, and 4) institutions and organizations.[21] This approach can positively affect the health status of individuals by highlighting their skills and abilities, maximizing their happiness, focusing on their positive emotions, preventing negative emotions from entering their personal sphere, and fostering their positive relationships.[22]

From the perspective of positive psychology, which values culture, people are products of the culture in which they live, and, thus, the issues they face should be addressed by that culture.[23] As a result, psychology should consider both the biological conditions and cultural beliefs of individuals. Religious teachings help people manage emotional pressures while facing stressful life events and suffer less damage through resources such as having a meaning and purpose in life, feeling like they belong to a divine source, hoping for God's help in adverse life situations, and having psychosocial support.[24,25] There is ample evidence that positive psychology training based on spirituality and religious teachings can effectively reduce anxiety, stress, and depression.[26] Different studies have also shown that positive psychology interventions improve children's well-being and self-efficacy and also improve their motives.[27,28]

2. Objectives

Students who have experienced the loss of a parent often face significant challenges related to self-efficacy and academic performance. To address these challenges, there is a pressing need for research to investigate effective interventions. This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of positive psychology training in mitigating the negative effects of parental loss on self-efficacy and quality of academic life. By providing empirical evidence for the potential benefits of positive psychology interventions, this research can contribute to the development of targeted support programs for students who have experienced the loss of a parent.

3. Methods

This applied quasi-experimental research adopted a pretest-posttest design with a two-month follow-up. The sample comprised female high school seniors with a parental death experience in Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province, Iran, in 2022. After a call for cooperation in the study, purposive sampling was used to select 40 eligible students as the sample from those who were willing to participate in the study. Using a random number generator, the participants were randomly assigned to an experimental group (n = 20) and a control group (n = 20). The sample size for each group was calculated using G-Power software to be 20 students. This calculation was based on an anticipated effect size of 1.08, a significance level of 0.05, and a desired power of 0.90. The inclusion criteria encompassed experiencing the death of a parent over the last year, being aged 16–18 years old, not taking psychiatric drugs, and not attending other psychological interventions over the past two months. The exclusion criteria included affliction with specific physical diseases and more than two sessions of absence in the intervention. All participants in both groups filled out the research questionnaires before the intervention (as the pretest), immediately after the end of the intervention (as the posttest), and two months later (as the follow-up).

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study. All participants provided informed consent, and their data was kept confidential. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The research was approved by the relevant institutional review board, ensuring adherence to ethical guidelines.

3.1. Measures

3.1.1. Self-Efficacy Scale

This 21-item scale was developed by Muris et al.[29] to measure self-efficacy in three areas: social, academic, and emotional. The items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale (5: very good, 4: good, 3: moderate, 2: low, and 1: at all). The total score on this scale ranges between 21 and 105, higher scores indicating higher levels of overall self-efficacy. The reliability of the self-efficacy scale was reported as 0.81 using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient.[30] In the present study, the reliability of the self-efficacy scale was demonstrated to be adequate, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.81.

3.1.2. Quality of Academic Life Questionnaire

This 39-item questionnaire measures students’ quality of

life in educational settings in seven dimensions: general satisfaction, negative emotions, relationship with the teacher, opportunity, development, adventure, and social cohesion. The items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale (5: agree, 4: almost agree, 3: somewhat agree, 2: disagree, and 1: almost disagree).[31] The total score on the questionnaire ranges from 39 to 195, with higher scores indicating a higher quality of academic life. A score of 39 represents the lowest possible quality of academic life, while a score of 195 represents the highest. In Iran, Soltani Shal et al.[32] reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85 for the questionnaire. In this research the reliability of the quality of academic life questionnaire was demonstrated to be adequate, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.79.

3.2. Intervention

The experimental group received a ten-week positive psychology training intervention, conducted by a psychotherapist who had completed specialized courses in positive psychology. The intervention consisted of weekly 90-minute sessions. In contrast, the control group received no intervention and served as a waiting list control.

Table 1. Overview of the Positive Psychology Training Sessions

Sessions	Description
1	After the participants and the therapist introduced themselves, the therapist briefed the participants on the intervention procedure, rules, and objectives.
2	The participants were trained in how to enjoy God's blessings and good events of their lives; they were trained in how to take advantage of their strengths in their daily lives; they were asked to note three of God's blessings and three positive events in their lives and explain the reasons every night before going to sleep.
3	The benefits of being grateful to God and God's creatures were discussed; the participants were asked to write a thank-you letter to someone who has done them a favor.
4	The participants were briefed on the characteristics and effects of hope and despair as well as the relationship of happiness and hope with anxiety from the perspective of the Qur'an; they were encouraged to express and positively analyze their past experiences regarding hope.
5	The participants were trained in how to establish effective communication with God, themselves, others, and nature; they were asked to make positive relationships with family members, friends, classmates, and school officials.
6	The participants were briefed on God's advice about mundane life, avoiding self-harm, and enjoying God's mercies; they were provided with models that hope, happiness, and positivity brought prosperity to their lives; they were asked to discuss these models and provide the group with similar ones.
7	The participants were trained in how to emphasize good memories and gratitude as a lasting form of gratitude and also to be patient and trust in God in the face of adversities; they were briefed on the role of good and bad memories with an emphasis on gratitude; they were asked to write a letter of appreciation and gratitude to someone they desired.
8	The participants were briefed on the importance of diligence, faith, prayers, and remembrance of God to give meaning to life; they were asked to write a paragraph about the meaning of life and read it in the next session.
9	The participants were briefed on positive thinking and its methods from the perspective of Islam; they were asked to choose one of the exercises presented in previous sessions to be discussed.
10	A summary of previous sessions was presented; the participants were asked to take the posttest.

3.3. Statistical Analyses

Descriptive statistics (e.g., mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (e.g., repeated measures ANOVA) were used for data analysis in SPSS-23.

4. Results

The participants included 40 female senior high school students with a parental death experience. The mean age of the participants was 17.24 ± 1.79 years, with the positive psychology group having a mean age of 16.88 ± 2.14 years and the control group having a mean age of 17.60 ± 1.44 years. Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation of the self-efficacy and quality of academic life of the participants.

Table 2. The Mean and SD of Research Variable in Experimental and Control Groups

Variables	Phases	Positive psychology group	Control group	P (between groups)
		Mean ± SD	Mean ± SD	
Self-efficacy	Pretest	46.15 ± 5.17	46.25 ± 5.61	0.954
	Posttest	83.90 ± 7.56	45.20 ± 5.35	0.001
	Follow-up	76.20 ± 6.87	46.25 ± 4.40	0.001
Quality of academic life	Pretest	100.85 ± 7.93	97.70 ± 7.09	0.193
	Posttest	146.400 ± 10.64	101.05 ± 6.88	0.001
	Follow-up	136.95 ± 12.02	100.60 ± 5.90	0.001

Before inferential statistics were used, the assumptions of parametric tests and repeated measures ANOVA were examined. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test showed that the data related to self-efficacy and quality of academic life followed a normal distribution pattern, and the non-significance levels of Levene's test also indicated the homogeneity of variance in dependent variables. In addition, Mauchly's test of sphericity demonstrated the heterogeneity of the variance-covariance matrix in the research variables. Therefore, the Greenhouse-Geisser was performed. Table 3 reports the results of repeated measures ANOVA.

The results showed the significant effects of "time" on self-efficacy and quality of academic life in students with a parental death experience (P<0.001). In other words, there was a significant difference between the pretest, posttest, and follow-up scores of self-efficacy and quality of academic life. The "group" effects also indicated a significant difference between participants in the experimental group and the control group in the mean scores of self-efficacy and quality of academic life

(P<0.001). Moreover, the "time × group" interaction revealed a significant difference between the two groups in the pretest, posttest, and follow-up mean scores of self-efficacy and quality of academic life (P<0.001).

Table 3. Repeated Measurement Results for the Effects of Time and Interaction Time and Group

Variables	Source	SS	df	MS	F	P	η^2
Self-efficacy	Time	15379.48	1.76	8754.75	248.99	0.001	0.81
	Group	598.58	1	598.58	21.24	0.001	0.43
	Time × Group	8881.76	3.51	2527.96	71.90	0.001	0.72
Quality of academic life	Time	24923.14	1.78	13965.87	236.39	0.001	0.81
	Group	22819.08	1	22819.08	74.48	0.001	0.72
	Time × Group	9149.76	3.57	2563.57	43.39	0.001	0.60

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the effects of positive psychology training on self-efficacy and quality of academic life in students with a parental death experience. The results showed that the positive psychology training positively improved the self-efficacy of participants. This finding is consistent with the results reported by Corbu et al.[33] and Basurrah et al.[34] In other words, the successful management of life challenges and problems can improve self-confidence, endurance, and self-efficacy through the strengthening process and the revised law of the Thorndike effect. Since the foregoing factors are among the essential components of self-efficacy, training students with a parental death experience in positive thinking techniques grounded in religious principles can improve their self-efficacy.[34] This type of education, on the other hand, can help students improve their social skills and establish positive relationships with others by instilling religious and moral values. Islamic teachings can also impart valuable ideas about social communication to students.

Additionally, this type of education can improve self-confidence and emphasize the value of education from a religious standpoint. Religious principles can not only improve students' belief in their ability to learn and foster a spiritual connection to science and knowledge but also help them manage their negative emotions.[35] For example, trusting in God and his will can help individuals feel less stressed and anxious. Generally, this type of education can increase students' confidence in their abilities to deal with all aspects of life and achieve their personal and social goals. Religious principles can help individuals commit to moral and spiritual values, resulting in increased self-efficacy.[36] Positive psychology training combines religious principles with positive psychology principles to improve the skills and abilities that individuals need to manage their challenges and achieve their goals. This combination can maintain the mental and spiritual balance in the lives of individuals and improve their self-efficacy.

The research findings suggest that positive psychology training can significantly enhance the quality of academic life. This positive impact likely occurs through several mechanisms. For instance, positive psychology training can foster a greater sense of commitment among students, potentially leading to improved academic performance, reduced stress, and a more fulfilling educational experience. Moreover, consistent with previous research,[27,37] positive psychology training may encourage students to reflect on moral and religious principles, contributing to a greater sense of purpose, meaning, and overall life satisfaction. Additionally, by promoting a belief in one's ability to overcome challenges and achieve goals, positive psychology training can boost self-efficacy, empowering students to approach their academic endeavors with greater confidence and resilience. Furthermore, positive psychology interventions often focus on developing strategies for managing negative emotions and cultivating positive emotions, helping students cope with academic stressors more effectively and maintain a healthier mindset. Finally, the findings suggest that positive psychology training may facilitate the development of stronger relationships between students and their teachers, creating a more supportive and nurturing learning environment. In conclusion, positive psychology training appears to have a multifaceted impact on academic life. By fostering commitment, promoting moral and religious reflection, enhancing self-efficacy, improving emotion regulation, and strengthening relationships, such interventions can contribute to a more positive and fulfilling educational experience.

The findings suggest that moral and spiritual values can significantly enhance the quality of communication between students and teachers. Students who receive such an education may be better equipped to capitalize on their educational opportunities.[38] This approach can foster self-efficacy and dedication to learning. Positive psychology training can assist students in achieving their academic goals and bolstering their academic self-efficacy. Moreover, such training can increase students' commitment to education while encouraging them to seek new experiences in their personal and academic lives. It can also promote positive behaviors in social and academic settings, facilitating more beneficial social interactions. In conclusion, positive psychology training can aid students who have experienced the loss of a parent in developing the psychological and spiritual skills necessary to navigate academic challenges and improve the quality of their academic life.

5.1. Study Limitations

The research limitations include a relatively small sample

size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations. Additionally, the use of purposive sampling may introduce biases into the study, as the selection criteria may not fully represent the entire population of students who have lost a parent. Furthermore, the single-site nature of the research limits the ability to draw conclusions about the generalizability of the findings to other geographical regions or cultural contexts. The short follow-up period may not be sufficient to assess the long-term effects of the intervention, and the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases such as social desirability bias or recall bias. Moreover, the study did not control potential confounding variables, which could influence the outcomes of the intervention and limit the ability to attribute the observed changes solely to the positive psychology training.

6. Conclusion

The research findings demonstrate that positive psychology training can significantly enhance the self-efficacy and quality of academic life among students who have experienced the loss of a parent. By combining religious principles, moral values, social relations, and psychological techniques, this approach provides students with the necessary tools to cope with challenges, improve academic performance, and develop a greater sense of purpose. Educational authorities are encouraged to implement positive psychology training interventions to support students who have suffered the loss of a parent, as this approach can be an effective means of promoting psychological well-being and academic success.

Research Highlights

What Is Already Known?

Students who have experienced the death of a parent often exhibit low levels of quality of academic life and self-efficacy. These negative outcomes are attributed to acute disorders in psychosocial functioning, highlighting the need for interventions to mitigate their effects.

What Does This Study Add?

Positive psychology training can significantly improve self-efficacy and quality of academic life in this vulnerable population. This intervention provides a promising approach for supporting students who have experienced parental bereavement and helping them navigate the academic and personal challenges they may encounter.

Author Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this work.

Conflict of Interest Disclosures

All authors declared that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval

The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University (code: IR.IAU.AHVAZ.REC.1402.027).

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