

Effect of Life Skills Training On Emotional Distress: A Comparative Study between Adolescent Boys and Girls

Hita C. R.^{1*}, G. Venkatesh Kumar²

ABSTRACT

Adolescence is considered as a crucial stage for emotional development. It is also seen as a time of hyper-emotionality, emotional conflict, and volatile mood states. Given that adolescents lack skills for emotional management, emotional distress during these years can hamper their immediate growth and adversely affect their transition to the next stage of life. Interventions that promote positive emotional development during adolescence are the need of the hour. Keeping this in focus, the present study investigated the Effect of Life Skills Training on Adolescent boys and girls with high Emotional Distress. The study used pre- and post-test experimental design with a control group to examine the stated objectives. 160 adolescent boys and girls (n=80), with a mean age of 16.44 years, were selected for the study using Positive and Negative Affect Schedule. Of these, 80 in the experimental group (boys=40, girls=40) were trained in life skills. Descriptive statistics, independent sample t-test and repeated measures of ANOVA were used to analyze obtained results. Major findings of the study indicate that Life Skills training has significant effect in reducing emotional distress and improving emotional health in adolescents. And the significance of it was found to be higher in girls compared to boys.

Keywords: *Emotions, Adolescence, Emotional distress, Emotional Health, Life Skills*

Emotions are ubiquitous and a universal feature of human nature. They are multi-component response tendencies that may be experienced as positive states of blissfulness and desirability or negative states of distress and aversion. Negative emotions, have been invariably linked to diseases and disorders of the mind and body just as positive emotions have been linked to physical health and psychological wellbeing (Fredrickson, 2000). This is because emotions represent the principle pathways connecting psychological stress to disease and disorder (Cohen & Pressman, 2006).

Adolescence is a unique and distinct period of life on the developmental continuum that is often considered as an important stage for emotional development. Seen as a time of

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Studies in Psychology, University of Mysore, Mysore, Karnataka, India

² Professor, Department of Studies in Psychology, University of Mysore, Mysore, Karnataka, India

*Responding Author

Received: September 08, 2017; Revision Received: October 09, 2017; Accepted: October 30, 2017

Effect of Life Skills Training On Emotional Distress: A Comparative Study between Adolescent Boys and Girls

transition from childhood to adult life, an adolescent is expected to attain emotional awareness, regulation, autonomy, and maturity to face the demands of later years. Developing emotional competence in adolescence is seen as a protective factor for the personal and social growth of youngsters. It is also seen as a strong predictor of life success (Broderick & Jennings, 2012). It enables one to take perspective, establish realistic and coherent sense of identity, build healthy and strong relationships, learn to cope with stress and manage emotions (APA, 2002). But this is easier said than done. Emotions during adolescence are intense, frequent and volatile. The maturing body and brain coupled by socio-cultural demands to conform can cause overwhelming emotional responses in adolescents, making it look like a time of 'heightened emotionality' and 'impulsivity'. The vast hormonal changes, increased limbic reactivity and restructuring of neural pathways in the adolescent brain amplify their sensitivity to emotional information in the environment, causing them to exhibit exaggerated emotional response (Broderick & Jennings, 2012; Curits, 2015). Since adolescents lack the needed tools for emotional management, hyper-emotionality at this phase of life can hijack adolescent behavior, causing instability and distress in their affective responses (Arnett, 1999; Guyer, Nelson & Silk, 2016; WHO, 2014).

Emotional distress during adolescence has been linked to a variety of maladaptive behaviors and difficulties in functioning for both boys and girls. These include academic failures, interpersonal difficulties, addictive behaviors, poor physical health, and proneness to mental disorders (Knopf, Park, & Mulye, 2008; Suris, Parera & Puig, 1996; Roeser, Eccles & Sameroff, 1998; WHO, 2014). Though there is no significant gender difference in the experience of emotional distress, research shows that the way boys and girls cope with it differs. Adolescent girls score high in internalizing the distress and suffer with it, while adolescent boys deal with it by acting out the symptoms through deviant behaviors (Soloski & Berryhill, 2016). The National Adolescent Health Information Center (2008) reports that "1 in 5 adolescents experience significant symptoms of emotional distress and nearly 1 in 10 are emotionally impaired. 20 to 25% of young people (10-24 years) have symptoms of emotional distress and 21.3% of teenagers between ages 12 to 17 have received some mental health treatment or counseling for emotional or behavioral problem". The report also notes that many of the mental health problems diagnosed during adult years have their onset in adolescence. When emotional distress, conflicts and negativity during adolescence is not resolved, the individual may transit with it into adulthood and continue to experience the ill-effects of it through life (Froese, 1975; WHO, 2014). Since research ascertains the undisputed role of emotions in one's overall functioning, escalating strategies to build emotional competence during the developing years of life becomes a necessity than a want.

In the past few years, many governmental and non-governmental organizations are developing and implementing programs that focus on building the strengths and skills of adolescents. One such program that has been advocated at both national and international level is the 'Life Skills Education' (Khera & Khosla, 2012; UNICEF, 2012; WHO, 2009). The World Health Organization (2009) defines Life Skills as "the ability for adaptive and

Effect of Life Skills Training On Emotional Distress: A Comparative Study between Adolescent Boys and Girls

positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life". Life Skills are essentially those abilities that endorse wellbeing and competence by enabling people to translate knowledge, attitudes and values into actual abilities, i.e. 'what to do and how to do it'. They facilitate cognitive, emotional and social skills by promoting self-management, social awareness, strong relationships, and responsible decision-making (WHO, 2009). Though essential to all throughout life, life skills are usually taught to adolescents who are venturing into life, having to deal with real time issues.

Research on Life skills confirm that they can be used as preventive, protective and promotive programs in adolescence. They empower people through constructive knowledge, skills and attitude to make informed choice with awareness and insight. Life skills have proven beneficial in thwarting a host of addictive and antisocial behaviors, which in most cases, are seen as maladaptive coping to underlying emotional conflict and stress (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2003; WHO, 2009). They have been effective in helping adolescents deal with challenges of transition (Kumar & Chhabra, 2014), reduce psychological distress (Ghasemian & VenkateshKumar, 2017) used to build emotional maturity and stress resilience (Shwetha, 2015), emotional health and self esteem (Mohammadzadeh, Hayati & Ismail, 2017), positive personal profile and emotional intelligence (Subasree, 2012), emotional competence and improving levels of functioning (Chhadva & Kacher). Thus, life skills have been advocated to address a variety of issues pertaining to adolescence, and in each case their effectiveness has been ascertained.

Most studies on adolescence emotional distress focus on evaluating mood states such as anxiety and depression. Emotional distress is equated to psychological distress and the words have been used interchangeably. In the present study, emotional distress is defined as a state of negative emotionality that causes aversive emotional experiences and reduces health enhancing positive feelings. An interactive and activity based module was developed on six of the ten core life namely - Problem Solving, Decision making, Interpersonal Skills, Communication Skills, Coping with Stress and Coping with Emotions. It was hypothesized that life skills training will have a significant effect in reducing emotional distress and the impact of intervention will have differing effects on adolescent boys and girls.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

160 adolescent students between the age of 10-19 years (mean age = 16.44) participated in the study. Participants selected were from different schools and colleges in Mysore city, based on initial screening and test scores i.e., individuals who scored high on negative affect and low on positive affect were taken with consent for the study. The sample consisted of equal number of adolescent boys and girls (n=80).

Effect of Life Skills Training On Emotional Distress: A Comparative Study between Adolescent Boys and Girls

Instruments

Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) developed by Watson, Clark and Tellegan (1988) was used to assess emotional distress. The schedule is a 20-item self-report measure that gives accurate assessment of positive and negative affect. 10 items in it measure positive affect, while the remaining 10 measure negative affect. As reported by the authors, the scale has good validity and reliability. For Positive Affect Scale, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was 0.86 to 0.90; for the Negative Affect Scale, 0.84 to 0.87. Over an 8-week time period, the test-retest correlations were 0.47-0.68 for the PA and 0.39-0.71 for the NA. PANAS also has strong reported validity with such measures as general distress and dysfunction, depression, and state anxiety.

Procedure

The study was carried out in three phases -

Phase I – Screening/Pre-test assessment;

Phase II – Intervention with life skills;

Phase III – Post-test Evaluation.

During Phase I, a large population of adolescent students (n=615), were administered PANAS to assess emotional distress. The data obtained was scored and 160 students who scored high on negative emotions and low on positive emotions were selected. Of these, 80 participants were randomly assigned to the experimental and control group respectively. Each group consisted of equal number of male and female adolescents (n=40).

During Phase II, participants in the experimental group were trained on 6 of the 10 core life skills. Participants in the control group were not subjected to any such training. The intervention consisted of 10 sessions, each with duration of 120 minutes. Each session was divided into two sub-sessions of 60 minutes, scheduled twice a week. The intervention lasted for 10 weeks. An activity based module was prepared to impart life skills in a practical and interesting manner. Given below is the protocol for Life Skills Intervention used in the study:

SESSION I Introduction	<i>Sub-session 1</i>	*Establishing rapport *Presenting treatment regulation
	<i>Sub-session 2</i>	*Promoting an understanding of life skills
SESSION II Evaluation of Problem	<i>Sub-session 1</i>	*Evaluating relevant problems with regard to life skills training
	<i>Sub-session 2</i>	*Developing a rationale for the training program
SESSION III Problem Solving Skills	<i>Sub-session 1</i>	*Defining Problem and the importance of problem solving skills through activities to promote self-awareness *Understanding the process in problem solving
	<i>Sub-session 2</i>	*Components in problem solving *Obstacles to problem solving *Overcoming obstacles
		*Defining Decision making

Effect of Life Skills Training On Emotional Distress: A Comparative Study between Adolescent Boys and Girls

SESSION IV Decision Making Skills	<i>Sub-session 1</i>	*Understanding decision making styles *Steps to good decision making
	<i>Sub-session 2</i>	*Components of decision making skills *Pitfalls to good decision making *Overcoming the pitfalls
SESSION V Communication Skills	<i>Sub-session 1</i>	*Defining Communication *Understanding dynamics of communication *The process of communication
	<i>Sub-session 2</i>	*Components in communication *Communication styles – Assertive communication *Barriers to effective communication *Overcoming barriers
SESSION VI Interpersonal Skills	<i>Sub-session 1</i>	*Defining Relationship *Types of relationships – Family, Friends, Intimate ties, Professional *Stages in interpersonal relationship
	<i>Sub-session 2</i>	*Essentials of interpersonal skills *Patterns of interpersonal relationships *Obstacles to healthy relationships *Understanding interpersonal conflicts and abuse
SESSION VII Coping with Stress	<i>Sub-session 1</i>	*Defining Stress *Understanding types, causes, and implications of stress *Stress management – steps to coping *Mechanisms in coping with stress
	<i>Sub-session 2</i>	*Styles and strategies in coping with stress *Blocks to Coping and overcoming them *Stress management – life style, relaxation, changing thoughts and behavior, mindfulness
SESSION VIII Coping with Emotions	<i>Sub-session 1</i>	*Defining Emotions – understanding adolescent emotionality *Types of emotions *Coping with emotions – the process
	<i>Sub-session 2</i>	*Coping with specific emotions – Anger, Fear, Sadness, Jealous, Disgust *Coping with positive emotions *Understanding the power of words
SESSION IX Termination	<i>Sub-session 1</i>	*Summarizing sessions *Questions and clarifications *Discussing personal significance and benefits of intervention
	<i>Sub-session 2</i>	*Exploring thoughts and feelings about termination *Preparation for termination *Saying good-bye
SESSION X Follow-up	<i>Sub-session 1</i>	*Evaluating progress made *Assessing maintenance of skills *Detecting early signs of relapse
	<i>Sub-session 2</i>	*Instruction for future *Suggestions

Effect of Life Skills Training On Emotional Distress: A Comparative Study between Adolescent Boys and Girls

During Phase III, post-test evaluations were done on both the experimental and control group using the same measurement tools as in Phase I.

RESULTS

The analysis of data for Positive Emotions has been presented under the following tables:

Table 1 Mean pre- and post-test score on Emotional Distress (Positive Emotions) of male and female adolescents belonging to experimental and control groups

Group	Gender	Pre test		Post test		Change
		Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	
Experimental	Male	24.08	3.77	39.63	2.29	15.55
	Female	22.42	4.79	42.33	3.79	19.91
	Total	23.25	4.36	40.98	3.40	17.73
Control	Male	24.93	4.77	27.70	4.32	2.77
	Female	22.83	5.48	27.38	4.82	4.55
	Total	23.88	5.21	27.54	4.55	3.66
Total	Male	24.50	4.30	33.66	6.91	9.16
	Female	22.63	5.12	34.85	8.67	12.22
	Total	23.56	4.80	34.26	7.84	10.70

Table 2 Results of repeated measure ANOVA on mean pre and post test score on Emotional Distress (Positive Emotions) of male and female adolescents belonging to experimental and control groups

Source of variation	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F value	P value
Between subject effects					
Change	9148.503	1	9148.503	833.047	.001
Change * Group	3955.078	1	3955.078	360.143	.001
Change * Gender	187.578	1	187.578	17.081	.001
Change * Group * Gender	33.153	1	33.153	3.019	.084
Error(change)	1713.187	156	10.982		
Between subject effects					
Between groups	3283.203	1	3283.203	122.127	.001
Gender	9.453	1	9.453	.352	.554
Groups x Gender	60.378	1	60.378	2.246	.136
Error	4193.838	156	26.884		

Repeated measure ANOVA revealed a significant increase in Positive Emotions of the sample selected irrespective of the groups ($F=833.047$; $p=.001$). In pre-test the sample had a mean score of 23.56 irrespective of the group, which has increased to 34.26 in post-test. The increase of 10.76 scores from pre- to post-test situation is found to be statistically significant. Further, when group wise increase in the scores was verified, experimental group gained significantly higher than the control group ($F=360.143$; $p=.001$). The experimental group has gained 17.73 scores (pre 23.25, post 40.98), whereas control group has gained only 3.66 scores (pre 23.88; post 27.54). Gender-wise also a significant difference was observed

Effect of Life Skills Training On Emotional Distress: A Comparative Study between Adolescent Boys and Girls

($F=17.081$; $p=.001$), where we find that female students gained more from life skills training than male students (mean gains 12.22 and 9.16 respectively). Lastly, the interaction effect between group and gender was found to be non-significant.

The analysis of data for Negative Emotions has been presented under the following tables:

Table 3 Mean pre and post test score on Emotional Distress (Negative Emotions) of male and female adolescents belonging to experimental and control groups

Group	Gender	Pre test		Post test		Change
		Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	
Experimental	Male	31.38	3.95	18.08	5.02	13.30
	Female	34.78	4.42	15.30	4.86	19.48
	Total	33.08	4.51	16.69	5.11	16.39
Control	Male	30.80	5.03	28.50	5.48	2.30
	Female	36.10	6.04	32.45	4.81	3.65
	Total	33.45	6.13	30.48	5.50	2.97
Total	Male	31.09	4.50	23.29	7.40	7.80
	Female	35.44	5.30	23.88	9.88	11.56
	Total	33.26	5.37	23.58	8.71	9.68

Table 4 Results of repeated measure ANOVA on mean pre and post test score on Emotional Distress (Negative Emotions) of male and female adolescents belonging to experimental and control groups

Source of variation	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F value	P value
Between subject effects					
Change	7498.128	1	7498.128	399.363	.001
Change * Group	3597.903	1	3597.903	191.630	.001
Change * Gender	283.128	1	283.128	15.080	.001
Change * Group * Gender	116.403	1	116.403	6.200	.014
Error(change)	2928.938	156	18.775		
Between subject effects					
Between groups	4011.528	1	4011.528	129.498	.001
Gender	487.578	1	487.578	15.740	.001
Groups x Gender	371.953	1	371.953	12.007	.001
Error	4832.488	156	30.977		

Repeated measures ANOVA revealed a significant decrease in Negative Emotions of the sample selected irrespective of the groups ($F= 399.363$; $p= .001$). In the pre-test the sample had a mean score of 32.62 irrespective of the group, which has been decreased to 23.58. The decrease of 9.68 scores from pre to posttest situation is found to be statistically significant. Further, when group wise decrease of scores was verified, experimental group obtained significantly lower scores than the control group ($F= 191.630$; $p= .001$), where we find that experimental group has gained 16.39 scores (pre 33.08 , post 16.69), where as the control group has gained only 2.97 scores (pre 33.45 , post 30.48). Gender-wise also, a significant

Effect of Life Skills Training On Emotional Distress: A Comparative Study between Adolescent Boys and Girls

difference is noted between adolescent boys and girls ($F= 15.080$; $p= .001$). This shows that female students gained more from life skills training than male students (mean gains 11.56 and 7.80 respectively). Lastly, the interaction effect between group and gender is found to be significant ($F= 6.200$; $p=.014$).

DISCUSSION

The study hypothesized the significant impact of life skills training on emotional distress in adolescents students i.e., life skills training will reduce negative emotions, thereby decrease emotional distress and increase positive emotions, thereby increasing emotional health and competencies. Life skills training was given to adolescents students who scored high on negative emotions and low on positive emotions. The data analyzed from the pre and post test scores clearly indicate the effectiveness of life skills training on reducing emotional distress, i.e., the participants in the experimental group showed a significant decrease in negative emotions and increase in positive emotions post intervention. Thus, the hypothesis of the study is accepted. The study also sought to evaluate if there is a difference in the effectiveness of life skills training depending on gender group. The results in this direction confirms the hypothesis i.e., adolescent girls in the group have a significantly higher mean value post intervention when compared to adolescent boys indicating that they have gained more from life skills training than boys. The results on positive and negative emotions in terms of interaction effect between group and gender show different trends. On positive emotions, there is no significant interaction effect between gender and group, while this is found to be significant for negative emotions.

The subjective report of the intervened group indicated improvement in their ability to recognize emotions, tolerate discrepancies in emotional expressions, cope with stressful situations, communicate better in interpersonal interactions, handle day-to-day issues and solve problems more effectively, make appropriate decisions based on realistic evaluations and appraisals, and perform better in challenging situations. The participants also reported better competency in dealing with negative emotions and consciously affirming positive experiences that helped them to maintain a positive mood state. As is the motto of life skills, the knowledge imparted to adolescents about emotionality and its effects on health and behavior during the intervention proved useful in enabling them to build insight about subtle aspects of functioning which hitherto they were unaware of. The result of the study confirms the findings of previous research investigations on the effectiveness of life skills intervention in building emotional competence, reducing emotional stress and helping adolescents deal with transitional challenges that in themselves cause emotional conflict and stress (Subasree, 2012; Chhadva & Kacher, 2013; Shwetha, 2015; Mohammadzadeh et. al., 2017; Ghasemian & VenkateshKumar, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Life skills are those abilities that help people to make the most out of life and live up to one's full potential. They can be used as coping skills, adaptive skills, management skills,

Effect of Life Skills Training On Emotional Distress: A Comparative Study between Adolescent Boys and Girls

negotiating skills, organizing skills or functional abilities that allow those who possess them to accomplish the impossible. Since life skills are generic skills they can be used as individual components or in combination or as a whole to deal with specific life issues. As previous studies indicate, this does not decrease their value or effectiveness. The essence of these skills lies in their simplicity and realistic approaches that can be tailored to suit any person and any life situation. The flexibility they provide in building knowledge about life, the experience and practice gained through them let people easily groom their skills to make life productive and meaningful. Teaching life skills early in life is beneficial as they permit an individual to make informed choices and learn to take responsibility for it. This can in turn prevent emotional and behavioral complications that hinder positive personal growth. Many professionals endorse that life skills are best when taught in adolescence. Adolescence is a critical time for introspection and self-development. Instilling essential skills of life during this stage can facilitate self-awareness, better behavior, healthy attitude, and competencies in the upcoming generations. Though there is growing consideration about the necessity of developing adolescent life skills, more needs to be done in implementing skill-based educational programs. Sensitizing adolescents, parents, teachers and the society in general about the usefulness of life skills needs attention. There is a need for policy makers, trained professionals and facilitators who can carry out this task satisfactorily to make a difference in the world of adolescents.

Acknowledgements

The help rendered to me by my guide, family and colleagues during my research is gratefully acknowledged. I also thank all the students who volunteered and participated in the intervention program. Without their support and enthusiasm, this study would not have been possible. My special gratitude to the school/college authorities and teachers who obliged and permitted me to work with students in their institution.

Conflict of Interests: The author declared no conflict of interests.

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How to cite this article: Hita C R & G Venkatesh (2017). Effect of Life Skills Training On Emotional Distress: A Comparative Study between Adolescent Boys and Girls. *International Journal of Indian Psychology, Vol. 5, (1), DIP: 18.01.018/20170501, DOI: 10.25215/0501.018*