

## The Effectiveness of Assertiveness Training on Alexithymia and Self-Differentiation in Runaway Girls in the City of Mashhad, Iran

Farzaneh Zareei<sup>1\*</sup>, Abbas Nazemian<sup>2</sup>,

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** This study evaluates the effect of assertiveness training on alexithymia and self-differentiation in the city of Mashhad, in Iran, about runaway girls. **Method:** The sample consists of 24 girls (12-20 years old) The tools used in the study were: assertion questionnaire Rathus, self-differentiation scale of DSI and the Toronto alexithymia scale. The study is applied as a Quasi-experimental design with the unequal control group. The plan is similar to the control groups pretest and post-test. **Results:** Significance indexes Multivariate analysis ( $f=158.029$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) indicates that there are changes in alexithymia and self-differentiation with assertiveness training. The average assertion scores in the post-test had increased strongly ( $M=58.00$ ). As well, the average self-differentiation score of the experimental group had a significant increase. The experimental group also had lower average scores of alexithymia. **Conclusions:** The results of the research showed that assertiveness training has a significant change in alexithymia and self-differentiation. It should be noted that the participants had run away from home due to various reasons relating to high levels of alexithymia and low levels of self-differentiation and assertiveness. During this training course, the girls with learning assertiveness made changes in the self-differentiation and alexithymia ( $M=196.00$ ) ( $M=47$ ).

**Keywords:** Runaways, Alexithymia, Self-differentiation, Assertiveness Training

Presently, running away from home is a common phenomenon. Running away is a social dilemma that has side effects at the level of social life; consequently, in recent years it has attracted the attention of social science and psychology researchers<sup>1</sup>. According to the USA Department of Justice, a child that leaves home without permission or does not return home when expected and stays away overnight is considered a runaway<sup>2</sup>. According to Zaer and et al, 60 percent to 80 percent of runaways will become prostitutes if they have not been collected by the police force or welfare patrol<sup>[3]</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Msc; Master of Clinical Psychology, Azad university, Science and Research Branch of Khorasan Razavi

<sup>2</sup> MD; Psychiatrist, The University of Medical Sciences of Mashhad, Mashhad, Razavi Khorasan Province, Iran  
*\*Responding Author*

Received: August 14, 2017; Revision Received: December 01, 2017; Accepted: December 05, 2017

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FYSB published a study about young people, between the ages of 14 until 21 years old, living on the streets in 11 cities. In this study, nearly half of the participants had been kicked out or abandoned by their parents or guardians and nearly 30 percent of participants reported being gay, lesbian or bisexual<sup>4</sup>. Almost 7 percent reported being transgender<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, 60 percent had been raped, abused physically, or robbed [6]. The data from this study is consistent with findings in other research. For example, other research suggests youth come from families who struggle with poverty and mental health or other behavioral disorders and this corroborates that a substantial proportion of homeless youth, perhaps between 20 and 40 percent, are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender [6].

Young people who live on the streets are at a high risk of developing serious lifelong health, behavioral, and emotional problems [reference]. Compared to youth who have never run away, they suffer from higher rates of depression [7], attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder and sexual abuse [8] and they tend to abuse drugs and alcohol [9]. The longer they are exposed to the streets, the more likely they are to fall victim to commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking [10]. Moreover, while on the streets, they fail to develop many of the educational and job-readiness skills that are crucial to financial and housing stability in adulthood [11].

Social and economic factors have a significant influence in the creation of escape. However, with all of these factors, personality characteristics and individual motivation in running away is very important [12]. In addition, self-differentiation causes girls to run away from home as well. In this area, Bowen, who developed the theory of the family system, said that Self-differentiation has 4 components: emotional reactivity, the “I” position, emotional cut off, and fusion with others [13]. Crespi and Sabatelli (1993) According to the self-differentiation theory, it is argued that running away from home is a response to the limiting behaviors of parents, as adolescents want to be able to form their own identities without restrictions. Researchers believe that a combination of family dynamics and development processes explains that adolescent try to get individuality and independence from the family by running away [14].

Intra-psyche dimensions of differentiation include emotional reactivity and difficulty in taking an “I” position, while interpersonal dimensions include emotional cut-off and fusion with others. [15]. The low level of differentiation of self shows poor emotional maturity and causes anxiety and fear in a relationship [16]. According to the description and discussion of self-differentiation, it is likely that the runaways have difficulty in self-differentiation and considering emotional cut off and difficulty in expressing emotions. It is hypothesised that alexithymia is possible in the girl's escapes.

Alexithymia, initially proposed by Sifneos (1972), refers to impairment of the ability to identify and describe one's own feelings and emotions. This construct may be related to the

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impaired emotional regulation observed in a broad spectrum of psychosomatic phenomena and to psychiatric disorders associated with altered emotional processing. Although it is not a clinical diagnosis, alexithymia was initially proposed as an explanation of the clinical features seen in patients with psychosomatic disorders. [17]. The continuum of symptoms of alexithymia in non-clinical populations can also be seen [18].

Alexithymia is divided into two types: primary and secondary. Primary alexithymia is a clinical trait for people prone to psychiatric disorders and secondary alexithymia is considered as a clinical state [reference]. Secondary alexithymia is caused by serious life crises like as trauma or severe disease

- Alexithymia is associated with a range of behaviors that can be problematic and has also been linked to deliberate self-harming behavior and has been linked to crime and delinquency in adolescence. Alexithymia has been reported to be associated with difficulties in relating interpersonally, in particular, it has been demonstrated that individuals who score higher on a measure of alexithymia are more likely to exhibit nonassertive social functioning and are more likely to be described feeling cold and distant from others whilst experiencing low affection and low connectedness in relationships. In particular, one study found that scores on the 'Difficulties in Describing Feelings' subscale of the TAS-20 were correlated with scores on interpersonal subscales 'vindictive', 'cold', 'socially avoidant', 'non-assertive' and 'exploitable' as measured by the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems. Researchers suggest that these difficulties in relationships may be linked to the difficulties that individuals with alexithymia tend to have in interpreting and expressing the appropriate non-verbal cues of affection. This is consistent with the finding that women who were deemed to have higher alexithymia difficulties had poorer perspective taking and empathic concern. In terms of social environment, it is proposed that if primary caregivers respond attentively to an infant's attempt to communicate that they are distressed, and help to soothe the infant's emotions, the infant learns that their feelings are understandable and manageable. Eventually, through repeated experiences, infants internalize these affection regulation strategies and learn to regulate their own emotions. In contrast, it is suggested that if caregivers are not responsive to the experiences of emotions, and do not help infants to regulate them, then infants may not develop the necessary skills or strategies to notice and regulate their own emotions effectively. It is therefore thought that inadequate care-giving in early relationships may increase the likelihood that alexithymia will develop. Alexithymia in adulthood was shown to be associated with retrospective reports of early maltreatment such as psychological abuse and neglect and retrospective reports of general family pathology, too much or too little familial affective involvement, poor familial behavior control and poor familial problem solving. In summary, these findings document a link between the nature of early experiences with caregivers and emotion regulation both in childhood and in later life. It may be hypothesized, therefore, that individuals who grow up in the care system, who may have experienced early trauma and disrupted relationships throughout development, may be more likely to develop difficulties in the successful management of emotions. In this study, we

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focused on secondary alexithymia. This study further proposes that alexithymia, a lack of emotional awareness, is the result of inadequate socialization of emotions by the family and that this deficiency contributes to adolescent problems [20].

It has been predicted that assertiveness training can be useful for emotional expression and self-differentiation. Acquisition and promotion assertion skills for youth people are vital. The assertion is the ability for negative and positive expression in an interpersonal situation without any worry about conditions that is with verbal and non-verbal responses in interpersonal activities. Assertiveness encompasses multidimensional aspects including behaviour, cognition, and affect [21]. Behaviorally assertive individuals are able to express their emotions, defend their goal, and establish favourable interpersonal relationships [22]. Cognitively and effectively assertive individuals can appropriately deal with both positive and negative emotions [23].

Previous studies have focused on this issue that assertion is a social skill [24]. The results of one study showed the runaway girls compared to normal girls have lower assertiveness. Also, the runaway girls often have an external locus of control and normal girls have an internal locus of control. It can be said that the type of cognitive strategy which girls are using for emotion regulation can be a preventative factor of running away [25]. In a study on women 25 to 35 years old employed in the education of Yasouj, the results showed that assertiveness training satisfactorily located to increase the level of self-differentiation [26]. In a study on drug users, the results showed that by life skills training (assertiveness and problem solving) concluded that the rate of self-differentiation in drug-dependent individuals has increased [27]. Also, researchers found out assertiveness improve self-esteem, increasing interpersonal interactions, communication skills [28]. Previous research has demonstrated that family expressiveness and emotional involvement predicted emotional components of alexithymia [29].

Considering the significance of assertiveness skills training and assertiveness training items, finally, lead us to the research question whether assertiveness skills training has an impact on alexithymia and differentiation of self in The Runaway girls or not?

### **METHOD**

The study is applied to a Quasi-experimental design with an unequal control group. The plan is similar to the control group pretest and post-test.

The research population consisted of all the runaway girls in Mashhad (about 100), 24 girls (12-20 years old) in 2015 were selected through the purposive sampling and were divided into two groups A and B. Group A received assertiveness skills training and Group B (control group) were placed on a waiting list. Participants for the study should have the following criteria: Informed consent to participate in research, low assertion, high alexithymia, low self-differentiation, enough education in reading and writing, no severe mental disorders, and no

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physical chronic diseases, refusing to participate in other therapeutic programs at the same time. The scales used in this study were:

### 1. Differentiation of self: (The DSI-R of Skowron & Friedlanderis):

A self-report measure used to assess Bowen's construct of differentiation. Two of the subscales (IP<sup>1</sup> and ER<sup>2</sup>) assessed the intrapersonal dimension of differentiation [30]. The other two subscales (R-FO<sup>3</sup> EC<sup>4</sup>) assessed the interpersonal dimension. Higher scores reflect greater differentiation. Participants were asked to rate how generally true the items were about them on a scale. Evidence for the construct validity of the DSI-Rh as reviewed above, and, as previously mentioned, Cronbach's alphas have demonstrated reliability except for the R-FO subscale, which remains somewhat problematic. Before confirmatory factor analysis in this study, the full-scale score demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90, and subscale alphas were as follows: 0.86 (ER), 0.79 (IP), 0.83 (EC) and 0.73 (R-FO) [31].

### 2. The 20-item Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20; Bagby, Parker and Taylor):

It is a self-report measure for alexithymia consisting of 20 items. Each item is rated on a five-point like scale and higher scores indicate greater alexithymia. There are three subscales: difficulty identifying feelings (DIF), difficulty describing feelings (DDF), and externally oriented thinking (EOT). The psychometric properties of the Dutch version of the TAS-20 can be considered adequate. Internal consistency in this study was good ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ). The validity and reliability of this scale were reported to be desirable in Iran. Cronbach's alpha in Iranian sample was 0.85 for the total scale and 0.82, 0.75 and 0.72 for DIF, DEF and EOT, respectively [32].

### 3. A 30-item schedule for assessing assertive behaviour:

This questioner describes the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule. This scale has 30 questions. Scores on the assertiveness schedule can vary from 90 to -90. The rates closer to +90 reflects are more assertive and conversely, scores closer to -90 indicate low assertiveness in the individual. The schedule is shown to have moderate to high test-retest reliability ( $r = 0.78$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and split-half reliability ( $r = 0.77$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Validity in terms of the impressions respondents makes on other people [33]. In Iranian sample, the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient 0.68 was obtained [34].

Training was conducted in 8 sessions of 90 minutes. In each session of training, the therapist on supervision, had worked on assertiveness skill. At the end of each session according to the agenda, a homework offered and assertiveness training was based on role playing and team working, The results were analysed by using covariance and the content of the sessions was on the following topics:

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<sup>1</sup>. I position

<sup>2</sup>.emotional reactivity

<sup>3</sup>. fusion with others

<sup>4</sup>.emotional cut off

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**First session**

Title: need for self-expression and its advantages in life

- Referrals and acquaintance

The assignment of recall situations in which one is interested none assert acts and expressed her reaction in that position .

**Second session**

Title: Human Rights and get students to understand their rights

- Reporting homework before the session and feedback
- The right to self-expression or lack of expression, true freedom of right, right to manifest opinions, and more. The assignment is about dealing with situations and reactions to those conditions and situations.

**Third session**

Title: behavior based on self-expression and alternative behaviors

- Reporting homework before the session and feedback
- discussion of different types of behavior and specific procedures to cope with change

- Reporting homework before the session and feedback
- Is anger helpful?
- Anger can be a very destructive emotion.
- Expressing some secret signs of anger
- When can we express our anger?

- Reporting homework before the session and feedback
- The evacuation of stress, releasing emotions, achieving goals, increasing intimacy and conflict and anger retention, acquisition and other unhelpful irrational thoughts.
- Coping with anger

- Guidelines to express anger appropriately The assignment is related to cope with anger
- Sixth Session

Title: A refusal skills

- Reporting homework before the session and feedback
- To discuss about the request and say yes and no
- Why say yes or no?
- Causes the inability to say no
- The reasons for inability to say yes

- Reporting homework before the session and feedback
- Talk about why we should criticize?
- To deal effectively and efficiently with criticism

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- Cope with criticism
- Advantages and disadvantages of criticism
  
- Reporting homework before the session and feedback
- Expressing opinions, coping with their anger and dealing with criticism
- Acknowledgment of participants

**RESULTS:**

The data was analyzed by SPSS software. The results of the descriptive analysis of each variable showed that the mean and standard deviation of the experimental group in post-test are significantly changed.

*Table 1: Descriptive indicators related to the pre-test and post-test data of assertiveness*

Group	Variable	N	Pre-test		Post test	
			Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Experimental	Assertion	12	14.00	7.00	58.00	10.00
Control	Assertion	12	14.00	7.00	14.00	7.00

As can be observed in the post-test, the mean score of the experimental group is changed. This change is not observed in the control group.

*Table 2: Descriptive indicators related to the pre-test and post-test data of alexithymia*

Group	Variable	N	Pre-test		Post test	
			Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Experimental	alexithymia	12	1271.00	4.00	47.00	5.00
Control	alexithymia	12	71.00	4.00	71.00	4.00

As can be observed in the post-test mean score of the experimental group is changed. This change is not observed in the control group.

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**Table 3: Descriptive indicators related to the pre-test and post-test data of self-differentiation**

Group	Variable	N	Pre-test		Post test	
			Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Experimental	self-differentiation	12	142.00	9.00	196.00	8.00
Control	self-differentiation	12	150.00	17.00	150.00	17.00

As can be observed in the post-test, the mean score of the experimental group is changed. This change is not observed in the control group. In this table, the average score of alexithymia has declined significantly.

To study the homogeneity of variance, Box test was used. Results indicated that the test is not significant which indicates that the variances are homogeneous, so multivariate covariance analysis can be performed.

**Table 4: Box Test to ensuring homogeneity of assertiveness, alexithymia & self differentiation**

Indexes	F	Degree of freedom 1	Degree of freedom 2	P
Values	32.04	21	1780.00	0.248

Meaningful indexes of multivariate analysis of covariance in table 2, indicated that significant differences in any of the variables have been established. Thus, each of the variables was examined.

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**Table 5: The results of multivariate analysis of covariance**

Type of test	values	Hypothetical df	Df error	FP	
<b>Pillai's trace</b>	0.936	6	17	158.029	0.001
<b>Wilk'slamda</b>	0.64	6	17	158.029	0.001
<b>Hotelling's trace</b>	14.47	6	17	158.029	0.001
<b>Roy' largest root</b>	14.47	6	17	158.029	0.001

**Table 6 : Compare the post-test scores in two groups By controlling effect of pre-test**

Sources changes	Variables	Df	F	P-value	effect of Coefficient	Statistical capacity
<b>Pre-test</b>	Assertiveness	1	0.454	0.509	0.025	0.030
	Alexithymia	1	0.261	0.615	0.014	0.040
	Self-Differentiation	1	0.451	0.541	0.012	0.045
<b>Group</b>	Assertiveness	1	95.53	0.00	0.776	0.764
	Alexithymia	1	131.02	0.00	0.643	0.678
	Self-differentiation	1	46.00	0.00	0.941	0.854
<b>Error</b>		22				
<b>Total</b>		24				

As can be observed in the above table, by comparing the post-test scores we can conclude that by attending assertiveness skills training, the experimental group compared to control runaway girls, had significantly higher scores ( $P= 0.509$ ). In alexithymia, we have reduced test scores compared to the control group ( $P= 0.615$ ). Therefore, assertiveness skills' training

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is effective in reducing alexithymia for runaway girls. As can be observed, the results of the comparison self-differentiation post-test indicated that runaway girl's experimental group has more changes than the control group had a score increase in self-differentiation ( $P=0.541$ ).

### **DISCUSSION**

In recent years, assertiveness skills are widely considered by experts in behavioral sciences, particularly psychologist. Also, the expansion of non-assertive behaviors in people who are affected by high-risk situations (drug use, risky sexual behavior, running away from home and), is considered. Assertiveness training for the person, shows respond appropriately in social situations to express their opinions and reaching to their goals [35].

The results of the current study showed that the variables of alexithymia and self-differentiation were affected by assertiveness training and in post-test. We had significant changes in the amount of these variables. Alexithymia had been decreased by assertiveness training and self-differentiation had increased by training. The program helped girls to improve their skills in the assertion and other variables.

It should be noted that participants had run away from home due to various reasons with high alexithymia and low self-differentiation and assertiveness. During this training course, the girls by learning assertiveness made changes in the self-differentiation and Caused Consolidation of "I" position.

Assertiveness concepts are trained to include: express honestly and appropriately, right emotional expression, facts and theoretical hypotheses. Assertiveness is an ability to express their honestly and emotions without violating anyone's rights or being anxiogenic.

The average of alexithymia scores in post-test is declined dramatically compared to the pre-test (47.00). In explaining this hypothesis, it can be said: inasmuch as this study focused on secondary alexithymia, that was caused by traumas and life crises, and it should be noted that runaway girls participated in this study, due to family problems, sexual abuse, stepmother and stepfather. had alexithymia. The persons who involved in alexithymia have problems with recognition, manifestation, processing and emotional regulation. Totally alexithymia is included as a defect in emotional regulation [36].

For this reason, these individuals have defective relationships and low life satisfaction. The person should express his or her thoughts without considering the social pressures. Therefore, these matters in the group to be trained; such as learning express feelings and thoughts correctly, empathic understanding, eye contact, talking in groups, regard to I position, feedback and style groups sitting in circles.

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Because the concept of assertiveness is based on the freely expressing thoughts and feelings, so teaching these skills can reduce the alexithymia. Because these individuals have difficulty describing feelings and emotions to others, and these people are in unsafe environments and conditions of disturbed family, a ban on emotional expression has grown. Due to this, they have a problem in emotional expression.

Therefore, assertiveness training enhances the ability to show feelings. The girls were living with trauma and the anxiety and tension and hostility and low self-esteem and shyness were located. This makes the continuation of alexithymia in runaway girls. People with learning communication skills and assertiveness in their relationships can properly express their emotions and as a result, alexithymia is reduced. Especially that assertiveness training as a group is held and group provides a suitable environment to facilitate the expression of self and emotions.

Based on the scale of DSI at the end of the intervention, assertiveness training is effective on self-differentiation. The mean score of the experimental group had a significant increase in post-test (196.00). In articulating this finding we can say that assertiveness training makes changes in the rate of self-differentiation. By training, people can recognize boundaries between personal and dependency and not to be unconditionally other subordinate and freely express their views and opinions.

Low self-differentiation is associated with experienced anxiety and stress in relationships. These girls had experienced this fear and anxiety in their family, so they preferred running away. By assertion training, it can help them to surmount on this anxiety and fear and finally have more mature in their emotions and relationships. In assertiveness training, methods of request and refusal, pragmatic and tangible were taught.

These persons tend to engage in fusion or emotional cut off from others in most of their close relationships when being under stress. Highly differentiated individuals, on the other hand, are not overwhelmed by strong emotions, thus they do not feel the need to cut off emotionally, and are able to take the “I” position in relationships, i.e. to acknowledge ownership of one’s thoughts and feelings without the need of confirming others’ expectations [15]

In interpersonal situations, poorly differentiated persons are thought to engage in fusion or emotional cut-off in response to stress or overwhelming anxiety [15]. According to this theory, a person with a high level of self-differentiation has a feeling and thinking and flexible behavior in coping with the pressures of life with bright emotions in relationship with others and has mental balance. People with low level of differentiation of self, have inflexible thoughts and emotional cut off and generally high levels of anxiety they are experiencing [37].

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It seems the training of refusal had involved in this change because of Refusal with Aggressive and conflicting nonverbal messages, leads the connection to be discontinued. On the other hand, discrete relationship leads to more emotional cut-off.

This finding is in accordance with research following in studies about the effectiveness of self-differentiation on assertion. The results have shown that self-differentiation is effective on the assertion [37]. Research also has shown that people with a low level of differentiation Experience A high level of anxiety in responsibility for their life [39].

To sum up, this study was an attempt to answer this question that whether assertiveness training can positively affect alexithymia and self-differentiation of runaway girls. Findings of the present research are in line with the findings of Moghadasiaghdam [25], Pazhohesh [26], Alamgir [27], Lin et al [29], Yousefi [37, 15].

Other studies believed that alexithymia causes disability in prediction social feedback and this ruins the trust of others and causes a feeling of being alone [40]. Also researches examined the correlates of alexithymia family and found that children raised in physically or emotionally unsafe environments and environments which are emotional expression had been banned, had a problem in emotional expression and Compatibility with the level of emotions [41]. Other researches shows that self-differentiation and secure and insecure attachment styles are able to predict the alexithymia [42].

As a final word, training healthy behaviors like as assertion is essential and training can prevent the spread of risky behavior. It is recommended that therapeutic and educational interventions, with the aim of improving the quality of life for runaway girls to improving the quality of their life.

Depending on the type of community study, research had limitations. Permission and coordination with relevant organizations for implementation of research, obtaining informed consent from all persons for training, low motivation and lack of monitoring of members outside of sessions, prevented the implementation of some of the home works. Due to legal restrictions and customs clearance, there was no long-term feasibility to follow-up. Given that, the members of the research were under pressure of many problems so it was hard to participate in sessions; sometimes sessions were held with a delay and did not show initially reluctant to participate.

### ***Acknowledgments***

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

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

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**How to cite this article:** Zareei F, & Nazemian A (2017). The Effectiveness of Assertiveness Training on Alexithymia and Self-Differentiation in Runaway Girls in the City of Mashhad, Iran. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, Vol. 5, (1), DIP: 18.01.074/20170501, DOI: 10.25215/0501.074