

Effectiveness of Positive Cognitive Behavioral Therapy on Psychological Flexibility and Meaning in Life Among Single Women

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The current research aimed to examine the effectiveness of positive cognitive behavioral therapy on psychological flexibility and the meaning of life among single women aged 25 to 35 in Tehran.

Methods: The method of the study was quasi-experimental with a pre-test-post-test design, including a control group and a follow-up phase. The population of this study consisted of single women aged 25 to 35 from Tehran, who had visited the community centers of District One during the second half of 2021. The sampling was purposive, and the study sample included a control group and an experimental group, each consisting of 20 randomly placed participants. The experimental group received 8 bi-weekly two-hour sessions in a group setting, following the protocol of Bannink (2014). Instruments used in this study included the Bond Psychological Flexibility Questionnaire (2011) and Steger's Meaning in Life Questionnaire (2010). Data analysis was conducted in two phases: descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. For inferential statistics, given the design of the study, parametric tests and the normality of data distribution were assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test and univariate analysis of covariance, and data analysis was performed using SPSS version 24.

Findings: The findings indicated that positive cognitive behavioral therapy significantly increased psychological flexibility ($F = 75.22, p = .001$) and enhanced the meaning of life ($F = 57.13, p = .001$) among the participants, and these effects were maintained during the follow-up phase.

Conclusion: Positive cognitive behavioral therapy can be an effective method for improving psychological flexibility and meaning in life among single women and can be utilized by therapists and clients.

Keywords: Positive cognitive behavioral therapy, psychological flexibility, meaning in life, single women.

1. Introduction

Since girls and women are significant demographic groups in the success of any country, and over the past few decades, the focus of research activities, policies, and programs of countries has been on their empowerment, therefore, attention to their mental health and well-being is of considerable importance (Crandall et al., 2016). The increase in worry and discomfort when girls reach marriageable age is such that they are constantly asked why they are not marrying. This is very distressing for the girls and causes grief and concern about their future. Some, especially those who are forcibly in the state of remaining unmarried—which in this case involves more girls than boys—feel undecided, unable to choose a proper goal for themselves, and find a clear path, and postpone everything until after marriage. They, with the thought that one cannot always live in their father's home, cannot foresee a clear plan for their future (Modarresi et al., 2017).

One important factor that affects individuals' mental states is the meaning of life. Meaning in life is one of the crucial characteristics of a healthy personality, and meaningful life and rational beliefs are valuable and protective factors (Lew et al., 2020). Evidence shows that the experience of meaning in life for women plays a significant role in their well-being, better mental health, and performance (Hedberg et al., 2011; Heintzelman & King, 2014). Setting goals and finding meaning in life can help those who are broken and harmed to overcome their depression and accept responsibility for their lives (Du Plessis, 2019). Lorca et al. (2019) also concluded that meaning in life negatively correlates with borderline personality disorder in women and mentioned meaning in life as a significant psychological variable in the pathology of disorders (Lorca et al., 2021). Kleftaras and Sera (2012) showed that young people who have more meaning in their lives had fewer symptoms of depression. Additionally, in their study, a significant relationship was reported between the general health of young people and their life's meaning. Assisting young single women in finding meaning for their lives seems necessary and can play an effective role in improving their performance in life, enhancing positive emotions, increasing their mental strength, overcoming feelings of emptiness and futility, and also overcoming environmental pressures (Kleftaras & Psarra, 2012).

Other research findings have shown that having meaning in life is a fundamental element in emotional-psychological well-being and systematically relates to various aspects of

personality, physical and mental health, and adaptation and coping with stresses (Schnell & Becker, 2006) and is a significant predictor of mental health (García-Alandete et al., 2013). Studies have shown that individuals who find more meaning in their lives can better cope with anxiety and life challenges, process new information more comfortably, and have a broader and more positive outlook on life (Garcini et al., 2013); therefore, it appears that finding meaning in life could significantly help improve the quality of life and mental health of single women, who are the subject of this study, and be a strong motivator for progress and health in their lives and significantly reduce their worries.

Another variable that plays a determining role in individuals' mental health and quality of life in this research is psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility means the set of behaviors that a person performs in line with their values. Overall, the absence of behaviors in line with an individual's values can cause them to feel their life is meaningless and goalless or to experience their life as full of pain and suffering. Additionally, having psychological flexibility means that in addition to valuable behaviors, a person also has a commitment to action when it aligns with life values (Twohig et al., 2015). Psychological flexibility also increases the ability to connect with the present moment and change or persist in behavior when it aligns with life values (Bond, 2011). Being in the present allows for continuous, non-judgmental engagement with environmental and psychological events, thus it can increase distress tolerance (Doorley et al., 2019). On the other hand, psychological flexibility refers to the ability to choose practical responses among available and appropriate options and use creativity. Psychological flexibility can adapt an individual's thoughts and behaviors in response to changes in environmental conditions (Berghoff et al., 2018).

The importance of psychological flexibility becomes apparent as many mental harms and behavioral abnormalities are related to it. An inflexible cognitive style in depressed individuals affects their attentional bias, acceptance of automatic information and thoughts, and attention system, and enhances depression (Taghavi et al., 2016), and irrational thoughts lead to distress, anxiety, and various life problems (Gunduz, 2013). Individuals with less flexibility persist in their prior learning that has negative consequences for them, and this persistence damages their adaptation to new conditions (Davis et al., 2020; Golestanibakht et al., 2022; Landi et al., 2022). Research has shown that psychological flexibility, by moderating factors

like stress and depression, enhances individuals' mental well-being (Poorakbaran et al., 2019). Given the aforementioned research, psychological flexibility can increase individuals' ability to control stresses and allows a person to experience a purposeful and meaningful life at the present moment, and enhancing this variable in young single women can be very effective and helpful for experiencing quality life.

In the last decade, there has been a trend to examine the positive aspects of health. In the 21st century, a group of psychologists has realized that humans should dedicate their rational energy to the positive aspects of their experiences; therefore, one of the topics that has attracted much attention in recent decades is positive psychology (Dieser & Christenson, 2016). This perspective emphasizes individuals' capabilities and possessions and believes that the aim of psychology should be to enhance the level of individuals' lives and actualize their latent talents (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Positive interventions have had encouraging results. Positive psychological therapy can reduce symptoms of depression and lead to better mood in individuals (Lam & Kahler, 2018). Among the emerging treatments based on positive psychology is positive cognitive-behavioral therapy. In fact, positive cognitive-behavioral therapy integrates cognitive-behavioral therapy with positive psychology and solution-focused therapy, inspired by the research and scientific applications of these therapeutic approaches (Bannink, 2014; Prasko et al., 2016). The focus of positive cognitive-behavioral therapy on personality strengths, positive values, skills, and resources enhances self-efficacy and self-respect and ensures the stability and durability of therapeutic changes (Bannink, 2014). Also, positive cognitive-behavioral therapy emphasizes adaptability, capabilities, resources, and personal strengths, which are significant in assisting clients in creating change (Bannink, 2014; Prasko et al., 2016); therefore, it seems that it could affect the improvement of psychological flexibility and meaning in life of single women.

Since young girls are future mothers and will play an important role in raising society's children, this necessitates further attention to their mental health and mental hygiene, and choosing an efficient and suitable treatment model in such conditions is of utmost importance. Given the increasing population of single women in society and the psychological pressures they face from family and society due to the issue of remaining unmarried, and considering the determining role of the mentioned variables in mental health

and prevention of mental distress and depression and increasing the level of happiness and satisfaction with life, it is necessary that these variables be examined in young single women and effective therapeutic methods for enhancing them be researched. Given the issues mentioned, the most important question we will seek to answer next is whether positive cognitive-behavioral therapy affects the variables of psychological flexibility and meaning in life in single women aged 25 to 35 in Tehran or not?

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and Participant

In this study, after the participants were selected through purposive sampling with inclusion criteria, they were divided into two groups. Participants in this study were individuals who visited community centers in District One of Tehran in the second half of 2021. Among those who met the research criteria and were willing to participate, 40 individuals who scored low on the questionnaires were randomly assigned into an experimental group and a control group. The inclusion criteria for this study were 1) age of participants, 2) being single, 3) not participating in concurrent training sessions, 4) willingness to participate in the study, and 5) low scores on the research questionnaire. The exclusion criteria were 1) absence from more than two sessions and 2) unwillingness to continue participation in the study.

Each group consisted of 20 individuals. The therapy group was treated with positive cognitive behavioral therapy, while the control group received no intervention. Participants responded to questionnaires before the start of the sessions, at the end of the sessions, and three months after the sessions ended. Group sessions were held over eight weeks, with one session per week for each group.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Psychological Flexibility

This questionnaire, developed by Bond et al. (2011), is designed to measure psychological flexibility, particularly in relation to experiential avoidance and willingness to engage in action despite unwanted thoughts and feelings. It contains 7 questions rated on a 7-point Likert scale (never=1; very rarely=2; rarely=3; sometimes=4; most of the time=5; almost always=6; always=7). The test-retest reliability of this questionnaire as reported by Bond et al. (2011) is 0.81, and its internal consistency is 0.84. In Iran, the Cronbach's

alpha reliability of this questionnaire is 0.89, and the test-retest reliability is 0.71 (Imani et al., 2016). The findings of Imani (2016) indicate that this questionnaire has suitable reliability and validity for measuring experiential avoidance/psychological flexibility. Higher scores on this scale indicate lower psychological flexibility and higher experiential avoidance (Imani, 2016).

2.2.2. *Meaning in Life*

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, 2010) measures two dimensions of meaning in life, namely the presence of meaning and the search for meaning, using ten items on a 7-point Likert scale from completely false (1) to completely true (7). Research indicates the validity and reliability of the questionnaire scores and its convergent and discriminant validity (Steger et al., 2006). Excellent internal consistency has been reported for both scales (Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.82 to 0.87) (Steger et al., 2006); and acceptable retest reliability over a one-month interval (0.70 for the presence sub-scale and 0.73 for the search sub-scale) has been obtained (Steger et al., 2006). The Meaning in Life Questionnaire includes two sub-scales assessing the presence of meaning in life and the search for finding meaning. The total scores for items 2, 3, 7, 8, 10 are allocated to the search sub-scale, and the scores for items 1, 4, 5, 6, 9 are allocated to the presence of meaning sub-scale.

2.3. *Intervention*

2.3.1. *Positive Cognitive Behavioral Therapy*

The experimental group underwent an intervention based on positive cognitive behavioral therapy: Positive cognitive behavioral therapy was taught to members in 8 bi-weekly two-hour group sessions following the Bannink (2014) protocol (Bannink, 2014).

Session 1: Establishing Connections and Setting Expectations

In the first session, the focus is on establishing rapport among group members, introducing the structure of the sessions, and outlining group rules. Participants get acquainted with each other and discuss their individual goals. The session also involves identifying aspects of life that participants find satisfying as well as areas requiring improvement. This setup helps lay the groundwork for a supportive and goal-oriented group environment.

Session 2: Envisioning Best Possible Selves

During the second session, the "miracle question" is used to help participants articulate their highest hopes and aspirations. This technique encourages individuals to define their goals in measurable, specific, and positive terms. Additionally, participants are introduced to positive visualization exercises, where they imagine achieving their best possible selves, enhancing motivation and clarifying future goals.

Session 3: Identifying Effective Behaviors and Patterns

The third session focuses on discussing exceptions—times when problems did not occur or when individuals successfully overcame them. It involves identifying effective behaviors for problem-solving and recognizing ineffective, repetitive patterns that do not align with personal goals. This analysis helps participants understand and modify their behavioral strategies to better align with their objectives.

Session 4: Exploring and Utilizing Personal Strengths

In the fourth session, discussions revolve around participants' experiences with assigned tasks that utilized their personal strengths. The educational component of the session highlights the nature of personal strengths and the importance of leveraging these strengths for success and improving life quality. Sharing experiences about using personal strengths fosters a sense of community and mutual learning.

Session 5: Creative Problem Solving Based on Strengths

The fifth session allows members to share their experiences and feelings arising from applying their strengths in new ways. Participants are encouraged to find creative and different solutions to achieve their goals based on their individual strengths. This encourages innovation and personal growth by reinforcing the practical application of strengths in everyday challenges.

Session 6: Emotional Regulation and Engagement in Pleasurable Activities

This session focuses on exploratory experiences of using personal strengths in various ways. Discussions also cover the importance of emotional regulation and balance, identifying pleasurable activities to enhance positive emotions. This approach helps participants broaden their emotional management skills and increase overall life satisfaction.

Session 7: Self-compassion and Empathy

In the seventh session, the discussion includes personal experiences related to pleasant emotions. Topics of self-compassion, acceptance, empathy, and a deep understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses are explored.

Participants practice self-compassion statements within the group, helping to build emotional resilience and foster a supportive environment.

Session 8: Review and Future Goal Setting

The final session reviews the changes in behavior and emotions among group members and revisits the goals for the future based on the group's experiences. Discussions focus on strategies for maintaining the positive changes achieved during the intervention. The session also addresses emotional issues related to the group's ending, helping members to prepare for transition and closure, ensuring they leave with a plan to sustain their growth.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data related to pre-test, post-test, and follow-up in the control and experimental groups were analyzed using SPSS version 24. The present study was reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the Medical School at Islamic Azad University, Mashhad Branch, and was approved with the ethics code IR.IAU.MSHD.REC.1401.119.

3. Findings and Results

The mean (standard deviation) age of participants in the experimental group was 38.5 (8.7) years, and in the control group, it was 36.9 (7.7) years. Additionally, the minimum and maximum ages in the experimental group were 26 and 43 years, respectively, and in the control group, they were 27 and 42 years.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Research Variables by Test Type and Group

Variable	Phase	Experimental Group	Control Group
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Psychological Flexibility	Pre-test	23.95 (3.92)	21.85 (2.85)
	Post-test	29.10 (4.86)	19.75 (2.80)
	Follow-up	29.40 (4.61)	19.60 (3.01)
Meaning of Life	Pre-test	46.90 (7.04)	40.25 (5.72)
	Post-test	53.15 (6.16)	41.70 (5.22)
	Follow-up	55.11 (7.26)	40.86 (4.69)

According to the results of Table 1, the mean values of all variables differ across the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up phases, with changes in means observed in the experimental

group during the post-test and follow-up phases, while no change was observed in the control group.

Table 2

Repeated Measures ANOVA for Comparing Pre-test, Post-test, and Follow-up of Psychological Flexibility and Meaning of Life in Experimental and Control Groups

Scale	Source of Effect	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance	Eta Squared
Psychological Flexibility	Time*Group	70.067	2	35.033	4.262	.001	.132
	Group	495.589	1	495.589	57.13	.001	.60
Meaning of Life	Time*Group	861.800	2	430.900	88.570	.001	.760
	Group	757.226	1	757.226	75.22	.001	.46

The results from Table 2 demonstrate that the F-ratio obtained for the group factor in psychological flexibility ($p < .01$) and meaning of life ($p < .01$) is significant. This finding indicates that positive psychological treatment has improved psychological flexibility and meaning of life. In

this regard, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted for the experimental group across three phases of the intervention, showing significant improvements in psychological flexibility ($p < .01$) and meaning of life ($p < .01$).

Table 3

Bonferroni Post Hoc Results within the Experimental Group for Positive Cognitive Behavioral Therapy on Psychological Flexibility and Meaning of Life

Variable	Time	Mean Difference	Standard Error	Sig
Psychological Flexibility	Pre to Post	5.54	2.51	.001
	Pre to Follow-up	5.61	1.10	.001
	Post to Follow-up	0.36	1.23	.758
Meaning of Life	Pre to Post	7.28	2.39	.001
	Pre to Follow-up	6.78	1.13	.001
	Post to Follow-up	1.33	1.29	.124

Changes over time in the experimental group as shown in Table 3 indicated that the variables of psychological flexibility and meaning of life were significantly different in the post-test compared to the pre-test ($p < .001$). Similarly, significant differences were observed in the follow-up compared to the pre-test ($p < .001$). However, no significant difference was observed in the follow-up compared to the post-test ($p > .01$), indicating the persistence of therapeutic effects.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine the effectiveness of positive cognitive behavioral therapy on psychological flexibility and the meaning of life among single women. The findings of this research demonstrated that positive cognitive behavioral therapy has a significant impact on increasing psychological flexibility and the meaning of life for single women, and these results remained stable during the follow-up phase. Geschwind et al. (2020) in their study on clients' perceptions of positive cognitive behavioral therapy found that participants preferred PCBT to traditional CBT. The popularity of positive cognitive behavioral therapy was linked to four factors: a sense of empowerment, the benefits of increased positive emotions, learning to appreciate small steps, and discovering optimism as a personal strength (Geschwind et al., 2020).

In explaining these findings, it can be stated that focusing on and engaging with the positive aspects of oneself is congruent with mental health and personal well-being. Additionally, optimism reduces the negative effects of anxiety, and thinking about positive outcomes decreases anxiety levels and enhances an individual's ability to adapt to their environment (Ashrafian et al., 2020; Prasko et al., 2016). Cognitive behavioral strategies that are accompanied by a positive approach are effective in enhancing the meaning of life for single women, as these treatments

encourage participants to change their thinking style. Individuals are able to free themselves from negative emotional reactions and develop a more positive perception of situations and pressures, identifying and exploring the positive potentials in those situations, and consequently altering their interpretation of events to create a new meaning for their lives that is motivating, productive, and inspiring (Bannink, 2014). Seeing oneself as goal-oriented and moving optimistically toward desired outcomes helps individuals perceive all their activities as meaningful. This therapy assists people in shifting their focus from failures to successes, enhances their strengths, and thereby gains the necessary hope and motivation to create desired changes and distance themselves from meaninglessness. This process helps single women to be less affected by environmental pressures, to act authoritatively in facing them, and not to view their lives as stagnant and meaningless. They are able to make more effective use of the opportunities they have and to progress towards their goals (Golestanibakht et al., 2022; Prasko et al., 2016).

Single women, by focusing on exceptions where they have succeeded, change their rigid and inflexible thoughts about themselves. Additionally, employing the technique of perspective change in this approach helps clients to adopt a stance that is accepting, kind, and self-attentive in the present and consciously recognize their value system. Mindfulness techniques promoted in this approach lead to greater continuity of the individual's presence in the present, which in turn significantly increases psychological flexibility (Ashrafian et al., 2020).

Positive cognitive behavioral therapy, during the conceptualization process, identifies the strengths and positive aspects of the client, covering not only their problems and issues but also their strengths and flexibility. The assumption is that therapy has two main goals: reducing the client's discomfort and creating flexibility (Bannink,

2014). In this therapeutic process, single women experience positive emotions in the present through identifying their resources and practicing how to utilize them. They create a positive outlook for their future goals through techniques such as positive mental imagery, which heightens their commitment to their goals and also defines specific goals expressed in positive terms throughout the sessions. These goals can change and be refined during the therapy process to optimize client performance, further enhancing their psychological flexibility (Ashrafian et al., 2020; Lam & Kahler, 2018; Prasko et al., 2016; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

5. Suggestions and Limitations

The main limitations of the current study relate to the use of questionnaires since the research results depend on the accuracy, honesty, and manner in which the participants respond to the test items. Additionally, differences in individual psychological characteristics, cultural and social differences of the sample were beyond the control of the researcher. The study was conducted on single women, which limits the generalizability of the results. Based on the findings of this research, it is recommended that these therapeutic approaches be included in educational programs at educational centers. It is also suggested that future research examines and compares the effectiveness of these approaches considering personality characteristics, and cultural and social factors. It is further recommended that these approaches be applied to single men as well and compared with the results of this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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