



The effectiveness of trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) on bereavement symptoms in bereaved children

Nima. Mirzaian¹

Bahram. Mirzaian^{2*}

Ghodratollah. Abbasi³

1. M.A student, Department of Psychology, Sari Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sari, Iran

2. *Corresponding author: Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Sari Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sari, Iran

3. Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Sari Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sari, Iran

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Abstract

Aim: The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) on reducing bereavement symptoms in bereaved children.

Methods: The research method was quasi-experimental with a pre-test and post-test design with a control group. The statistical population was all children aged 9 to 11 years old in Sari city who lost one of their parents due to covid-19 disease. In order to select a statistical sample, 30 people who met the criteria of the study and were willing to receive treatment were selected and assigned to an experimental group and a control group (each group contains 15 people) by a simple random method. The experimental group received Cohen, Mannarino and Knudsen's (2004) trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy in a group method during 16 90-minute sessions, and the control group did not receive any intervention until the follow-up test. The instrument used in this study included the Children's Bereavement Scale (IPG-C) (Spwiche et al., 2011). The data obtained in the three stages of pre-test, post-test and follow-up were analyzed using SPSS-22 software by variance analysis with repeated measurements. **Results:** The results showed that cognitive-behavioral therapy focused on trauma led to the reduction of grief symptoms ($F=4.69$; $P<0.05$) of bereaved children. The results also showed that the effect of the treatment was permanent during follow-up. **Conclusion:** The research results provide evidence that trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy is a suitable method for reducing the symptoms of bereavement in children and can lead to improving the mental health of bereaved children.

Keywords: *trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, symptoms of grief.*

Introduction

Approximately 78% of youth report having experienced the death of a close relative or friend by the age of 16 (Harrison & Harrington, 2001). Of all children who experience such a loss, an estimated 5–10% experience clinically significant psychiatric problems. Some also (Capello et al., 2018) believe that 18% of young people who refer to receive psychological services have significant distress and dysfunction. Such problems include major depressive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and prolonged bereavement disorder (PGD) (Malhem et al., 2012). Prolonged bereavement disorder (PGD) includes several symptoms, including separation distress, preoccupation with the deceased, feeling aimless about the future, numbness, difficulty accepting the loss, and difficulty moving on with life without the deceased (Spwiche et al., 2012). A significant number of bereaved adults develop prolonged bereavement disorder; A syndrome that includes debilitating bereavement symptoms distinct from depression and anxiety (Spwiche et al., 2011). But few studies have investigated the phenomenology and correlates of long-term bereavement disorder among children and adolescents.

Few effective interventions are available for bereaved children and adolescents. Based on a meta-analysis of 13 evidence-based studies examining the effectiveness of bereavement interventions in children, Carrier, Holland, and Niemer (2007) concluded that the interventions available at the time were no more beneficial than no intervention. Children who survived traumatic events are treated by social workers, psychologists and other mental health professionals. They are treated through many methods in the hope of reducing their stress, but most of these treatments are not highly effective because they are not focused on trauma (Sildron, Wagner, 2006). Therefore, trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT), which is considered a relatively new treatment, has not been implemented on children who experience the trauma of the death of a parent, and its effectiveness has not been investigated. By conducting this research, it is possible to provide a suitable method for children who have faced the trauma of losing a parent to be used in clinical centers so that it is more effective in treating these symptoms and preventing the consequences. Considering the high incidence of traumatic events, as well as the vulnerability of children and teenagers to them, the results of this research can be useful for clinical centers, mental hospitals, therapists and researchers. The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy on bereavement symptoms of bereaved children caused by covid-19. Therefore, the question of the current research is as follows: 1- Was the cognitive behavioral therapy focused on trauma effective on the bereavement symptoms of bereaved children caused by the covid-19 disease in the post-test stage? 2- Was cognitive behavioral therapy focused on trauma effective on the bereavement symptoms of bereaved children caused by covid-19 disease in the follow-up phase?

Method

The research method was quasi-experimental with a pre-test and post-test design with a control group. The statistical population was all children aged 9 to 11 years old in Sari city who lost one of their parents due to covid-19 disease. In order to select a statistical sample, 30 people who met the criteria of the study and were

willing to receive treatment were selected and assigned to an experimental group and a control group (each group contains 15 people) by a simple random method. The experimental group received Cohen, Mannarino and Knudsen's (2004) trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy in a group method during 16 90-minute sessions, and the control group did not receive any intervention until the follow-up test. The instrument used in this study included the Children's Bereavement Scale (IPG-C) (Spwiche et al., 2011). The data obtained in the three stages of pre-test, post-test and follow-up were analyzed using SPSS-22 software by variance analysis with repeated measurements.

Results

The results showed that cognitive-behavioral therapy focused on trauma led to the reduction of grief symptoms ($F=4.69$; $P<0.05$) of bereaved children. The results also showed that the effect of the treatment was permanent during follow-up.

Conclusion

The present study was conducted with the aim of investigating the effectiveness of trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy on bereavement symptoms, cognitive emotion regulation, and internalized problems of children. The death of a father, mother, sister, brother, or a loved one is one of the most common and distressing forms of trauma among children and adolescents (Capello et al., 2020). Childhood bereavement is associated with a range of mental and behavioral health problems, including depression, post-traumatic stress, substance use, reduced academic performance, and suicidal behaviors (Hill et al., 2019; Laine & Capello, 2020).

The limitations of the statistical population research were the study of a specific group of the population, namely 9-11-year-old children (boys and girls) of Sari city, which makes the possibility of generalizing the results to other populations cautious. Participants in the initial selection participated in the experiment purposefully. Therefore, the results may have been affected by the effect of social desirability. Considering that this research was conducted on the community of 9-11-year-old children (boys and girls), it is suggested to be conducted in other communities as well. Considering that one of the controversial and significant trends in the field of psychology and counseling, which has been widely noticed today, is the field of children, it is suggested that counselors and child psychologists use the findings of this research. It is suggested to use cognitive-behavioral therapy method focused on trauma for bereavement counseling in children in counseling centers.

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