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Increasing mental health of university students through Life Skills Training (LST)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of Life Skills Training (LST) program on mental health of university students. The sample was comprised of 60 (20 boys and 40 girls) undergraduate students who were enrolled at “life skills” workshop that held on 12 sessions of 2 and half hours in counseling center of university. The design of pretest-posttest without control group was employed. Participants answered to General Health Questionnaire (GHQ, 28 items) before and after they received the LST program. The data were analyzed by t-tests for dependent groups and covariance method. The results showed that there was a significant effectiveness of LST program on mental health of students, and girls received more benefit of the program than boys. According to this study, life skills training can be useful for increasing mental health of university students.

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Key words: life skills training; mental health; university students.

1. Introduction

Complexity and rapid changes put many challenges in human life. How to cope with difficult situation is the main concerns of the experts, especially in the field of education. People need different functions to cope with their lives, so life skills training received more attention of all educational systems around the world. These skills make people ready to overcome to struggles and tensions that face in the modern society (WHO^{*}, 1999).

According to WHO life skills comprised of ten skills: self-awareness, effective communication skills, effective interpersonal relationship, decision making, problem solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, the ability of having sympathy with others, the ability to deal with emotions (e.g. anxiety, depression, failure,...) and the ability to deal with stress. These skills can help individual to cope with his situation (WHO, 1999).

Starting student life at university is an important stage in the life, because students should get ready to work and live as a productive member of the society. College can be a stressful experience for students. Helping students manage stressful lives has been a goal of counseling practitioners, because college students perceive academic life as stressful and demanding and report experiencing emotional and cognitive reactions to this stress, especially due to

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external pressures and self-imposed expectations. Coping with academic life requires different skills; integration of life skills training into university curriculum is necessary to examine.

Life skills training (LST) program that presented by Botvin, 1984 tries to increase coping recourses of people that are essential factors in mental health. The purpose of LST program is increasing mental and social ability and training creative individuals that can generate new ideas in the society (WHO, 1994). LST program was found effective and useful in various studies such as prevention of drug abuse (Botvin, Boker & Botvin, 1984; Botvin & Kahtor, 1999; Pentz, 1983; Wenzel, Weichold & Silbereisen, 2009), reduce cigarette consumption (Gorman, 2002; 2005), prevention of unrestrained sexual behavior (Pick, Givaundn, Poortinga, 2003; Hutchinson, 2005), HIV prevention (Bova, Burwick & Quinones, 2008) and suicide prevention (Lafromboise & Howard-Pitney, 1995). Also, The efficacy of LST program on increase of mental health is reported by Sobhi-Gharamaleki, & Rajabi, 2010; Although, the participants in their study were only boys who were suspected to mental disorder. But, as WHO mentioned mental health is not just the absence of illness, but it is rather a feel of happiness and welfare. So, by presenting LST program, we are looking for increasing mental health, not just decreasing mental illness symptoms.

A review of literature had shown that most research in this area held on high school students and less attention has been located on university students. The aim of this study is answer to these questions that if life skills training can increase mental health of university students and is there any difference in effectiveness of the program by gender?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample comprised of 60 (20 males and 40 females) undergraduate students participated in a workshop on life skills held on counselling center of university at 2011. The participants were in the age range of 19 to 29 with a mean age of 24.32 and standard deviation 1.47. All participants were at average intelligence and middle socio-economic class.

2.2. instrument

The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) was used to assess general health. The GHQ is one of the most widely used psychometric measures in health and psychiatry and has a good reliability and validity (Goldberg & Williams, 1998). Each item is assessed on a four-point Likert-type scale, which assesses how a person has been feeling over the past few weeks. Higher scores indicated greater degrees of mental illness. It consist of four sub-scales of psychosomatic symptoms, anxiety and sleep disorder symptoms, social dysfunction scale and depression symptoms scale, each scale consist of 7 items. The total score of 28 items was used as a mental health score. A total score above 22 is indicating of pathological symptoms. Validity and reliability of the test had confirm in different studies; for example, Tajalli, Sobhi, and Ganbaripannah, 2010, reported Cronbach's alpha 0.94 for this scale. Alpha coefficients for the present study was 0.88 for the total scale and for the sub-scales were 0.79, 0.85, 0.58 and 0.81, respectively.

2.3. LST program

LST program was conducted as a workshop that held by counseling center of Islamic Azad University, Saveh Branch. The workshop was administered for 12 weeks, 2 and half hours per week, and there was typically a 30-person limit per session. Participants were divided to two groups that were trained by the same instructor. On the first session, the instructor outlined the program and lectured on the importance of life skills in student's life. Each of the next 10 sessions was dedicated to practice one of the life skills per session, participants were ask to take part in class discussions and brain storming and they had this chance to practice the skills in their real life and provide feedback for the next session, and they could talk easily about their own experiences in the class. In the last session students provide feedback about their participation in the program and the instructor provided a summary of how the different life skills impact on mental health. Table1 is illustrated the content of LST program.

* World Health Organization

Table1. Description of LST program

Session		description
1	Introduction	Explanation of importance of life skills training and pretest
2	Self-awareness	Identify our strengths and weaknesses and can answer to “who am I” question
3	Decision making	Choosing the best solution by assessing different solutions
4	Problem-solving	How to solve the problems by dividing it into smaller components
5	Creative thinking	Thinking in a different way and beyond our own direct experiences
6	Critical thinking	Accept or reject ideas or issues by reasoning
7	Interpersonal relationship	How to start and continue the relationship with others
8	Emotion management	Where and when show which kind of emotion
9	Empathy	Can understand people and feel their feelings
10	Stress management	Can control stress in stressful situations
11	Conflict management	Can make decision in a conflict situation
12	Review	Review and post-test

3. Results

To test research hypothesis that LST program will increase mental health and its subscales in students, we conducted t-tests for dependent groups and the results had shown in table 2.

Table2. Summarize of t- test for comparing mean scores in pre-test and post-test of mental health

Scales	Test	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>P</u>
psychosomatic	Pre-test	5.93	4.14	9.82	59	0.001
	Post-test	3.55	2.92			
Anxiety	Pre-test	4.32	6.20	8.57	59	0.001
	Post-test	2.82	3.67			
Social function	Pre-test	2.75	7.47	12.97	59	0.001
	Post-test	2.47	3.62			
Depression	Pre-test	2.98	3.00	7.67	59	0.001
	Post-test	1.07	1.68			
Mental health	Pre-test	22.58	10.76	16.46	59	0.001
	Post-test	11.90	7.65			

As the results shows after training the mean scores of experimental group decreased at post-test in mental health and all its subscales. As the lower scores in the scale means higher mental health, we can reject the null hypothesis at $p < 0.001$ level and conclude that life skills training program increased mental health of participants.

3.1. Is the result differing in male and female students?

To answer this question, we conducted ANCOVA. Levin’s test for equality of variances confirm the presumption for using the test ($P < 0.001$). The results summarized in table3.

Table3. Summarize of ANCOVA test for between subject factors (gender) in mental health

Source	MS	df	SS	F	P	ω^2
Pretest mental health	2829.185	1	2829.185	291.01	0.001	0.83
Gender	70.168	1	70.168	7.168	0.009	0.11
Error	554.14	57	9.72			
Total	11952	59				

As the results shows the effect of gender is significant, $F(57, 1) = 7.21$, $P < 0.01$. So, the effect of life skills training is differ for males and females; as the means shows it was more effective for females ($M=11.13$) than males ($M=13.45$). The mean scores for girls and boys at pre-test was 20.25 and 27.25 respectively.

4. Discussion

The results of this study showed that life skills training program had increased mental health of participants. In fact, students had better feeling about themselves, and had fewer interpersonal and intrapersonal problems when they knew how to cope with their situation. LST program reduced the burden that stressful life events imposed on students. This allowed students to whatever stressor is affecting them on even terms, not to be overwhelmed by it. The results of several studies are consistent with the result of this study (for example, Botvin, Baker, Dusenbary, et al., 1999; Keogh, Bond, & Flaxman, 2006; Lou, Wang, Tu, Gao, 2008; Magnani, Macintyre, Mehyrar, Brown, Hutchinson, 2005). Also, the results showed that LST program was more effective for females than males; it can be explain by the fact that females were in the same sex as instructor and it can affect social modeling that is an important factor in life skills learning.

Although, the present study found evidence that LST program improved mental health by promoting positive changes in coping skills, the results of this study should be considered in light of several limitation. The first limitation relates to the self-report survey approach. Due to the nature of survey research, self-report data is relied upon the participant's responses which can be inaccurate because of the inherent dynamics of self-report. The second limitation relates to experimental design. Although participants showed measurable changes from the intervention, we had no control group to compare with and no chance to follow the participant's changes in the future.

LST program provided a structured opportunity for students to learn, practice, and applies life skills techniques and changes strategies in their present lives. LST is a program that its usefulness has been shown in numerous studies. The overall finding of this study and similar studies suggest that LST program increase mental health. So, it is necessary for educational systems to pay attention to this matter and include this program as a part of curriculum materials in different level of education. This program as an instructional classroom intervention that has been designed, implemented and evaluated to help students learn strategies for altering potentially harmful life-style habits is suggested as a course work for Iranian students. Because college students are forming adult life-styles, this course work can be particularly appropriate for them.

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