

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Test Anxiety and Generalized Anxiety Disorder: Case Report

Test Anxiety and Generalized Anxiety Disorder

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History Received: 05/03/2024 Accepted: 06/08/2024 Published: 31/08/2024 Keywords: Cbt, Generalized anxiety disorder, Exam anxiety.	Millions of young individuals in Turkey diligently prepare for annual exams that play a critical role in their academic and/or professional lives. During the rigorous exam preparation process, a significant hurdle emerges in the form of exam anxiety—a challenge that profoundly impacts their performance. These exams, designed to distinguish and evaluate individual aptitudes, have become an inherent part of our lives. While a moderate degree of anxiety can enhance exam performance, heightened levels of anxiety pose a serious psychological risk to individuals in these circumstances. Confronted by this risk, an array of negative thoughts, unpleasant emotions, and maladaptive behaviors can manifest among those immersed in exam preparation, particularly among young adults. Prior research has shown Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) as an effective approach for alleviating the symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). In the present case study, we demonstrate the psychotherapeutic journey of a 24-year-old client who triumphed over anxiety through CBT. Notably, it became evident that this client's anxiety extended beyond exam-related concerns, encompassing a broader spectrum of challenges in her life. Thus, the therapeutic intervention in this case not only addressed exam-related anxiety but also encompassed a broader exploration of GAD. Post-therapy, a significant alleviation of the client's distressing symptoms became apparent.

Sınav Kaygısı ve Yaygın Anksiyete Bozukluğunda Bilişsel Davranışçı Terapi: Olgu Sunumu

Sınav Kaygısı ve Yaygın Anksiyete Bozukluğu

Makale Bilgisi	ÖZET
Makale Geçmişi Geliş Tarihi: 05/03/2024 Kabul Tarihi: 06/08/2024 Yayın Tarihi: 31/08/2024 Anahtar Kelimeler: Bdt, Yaygın anksiyete bozukluğu, Sınav kaygısı.	Türkiye'de milyonlarca genç her yıl belirli dönemlerde yapılan birbirinden farklı sınavlara hazırlanmaktadır. Bu bireylerin sınava hazırlık sürecinde karşılaştıkları sınav başarılarını dahi etkileyen önemli sorunlarından biri sınav kaygısıdır. Sınavlar öğrencilerin bilgi düzeylerini ölçmek için kullanılan ülkelerde hayatın kaçınılmaz bir parçasıdır. Optimal düzeydeki kaygı düzeyleri sınavlardaki başarıyı olumlu etkilerken, yüksek kaygı karşımıza bu dönemdeki insanlar için ciddi bir tehdit oluşturmaktadır. Bu tehdit karşısında sınava hazırlanan özellikle genç ve genç yetişkin bireylerde çeşitli olumsuz düşünceler, kötü hissettiren duygular ve işlevsiz davranışlar oluşabilmektedir. Yapılan araştırmalarda Bilişsel Davranışçı Terapinin (BDT) yaygın anksiyete bozukluğunu azaltmada etkili bir yöntem olduğu saptanmıştır. Bu çalışmada, BDT uygulanması sonucunda iyileşen 24 yaşında bir olgu sunulmuştur. Olgunun, sınav kaygısının yanı sıra, yaşamının yoğun bir bölümünde farklı durumlarda da aslında kaygı duygusu söz konusu olduğu anlaşılmıştır. Bu açıdan bakıldığında olguya BDT kullanılarak sadece sınav kaygısı üzerine değil, yaygın anksiyete bozukluğu da çalışılmıştır. Terapi sonrasında yakınmalarda belirgin bir düzelme saptanmıştır.

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Introduction

Test anxiety has been identified as anxiety-provoking actions and thoughts triggered by test stimuli in academic environments (1). It has been observed that 71.2% of people preparing for an exam in our country have moderate to high levels of test anxiety, a type of anxiety that prevents candidates from preparing for the exam and performing well during the exam (2). Research suggests that lack of knowledge, lack of efficient study skills, lack of time management skills, expectations, and pressures especially from those closest to the individual, lack of confidence, parents' perfectionism, and too much focus on the outcome are the main causes of test anxiety (3).

Generalized anxiety disorder, as defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5 (DSM-5), is characterized by excessive worry about activities and difficulty controlling them most days for at least 6 months (4). According to the DSM-5, this anxiety is expected to be accompanied by at least three of the following symptoms: restlessness, nervousness, or a constant state of being on edge, getting easily tired, difficulty concentrating, getting tempered easily, muscle tension, and difficulty sleeping (4).

This study presents the treatment process of a client who has been experiencing test anxiety due to the Public Personnel Selection Examination (KPSS) for over six months and also meets the criteria for generalized anxiety

disorder according to DSM-5, using cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) (4).

Case

Y.O is the first child of a family with two children. She is 25 years old and has a college degree. Her mother is a housewife, and his father works as a laborer in a factory. She lives with her parents and sibling. The client cited her intense anxiety about the KPSS exam as her chief complaint. The client stated that when she sits at her desk, thoughts such as *"I will not be able to succeed, and if I fail, I will have to work at a college with low pay and excessive workload for my whole life. I will never have time for myself, and I will never enjoy life"* come to her mind. The client reported that her distressing thoughts made it impossible for her to concentrate, that she realized that she could not remember the subjects she studied the next day, and that this situation decreased her motivation and caused her to experience physical symptoms such as heart palpitations.

She reported experiencing intense anxiety during the university entrance exam, which affected her performance. Sweaty hands, focus issues, and prolonged exam time were noted. Post-graduation work included challenging conditions and harassment. Early flirtation experience was in high school; none followed. Recent therapy coincided with her first flirtations. Sessions targeted her anxieties about these interactions.

Cbt Treatment Strategies

In the initial therapy session, a comprehensive evaluation of test anxiety occurred alongside psychoeducation about cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). A problem list was formed, including Y.O's concern about test anxiety and significant relationship issues.

In later sessions, Y.O's negative automatic thoughts were examined. She discovered that emotions are influenced by interpretations, not events themselves. Thought recording forms were used, followed by cognitive restructuring to challenge and replace negative thoughts with more balanced viewpoints. Contrary evidence was emphasized, including Y.O's previous accomplishments.

Y.O's overemphasis on success and her low tolerance for setbacks became the focus of later sessions. Socratic questioning was used to uncover the extent to which external pressures contributed to these thought patterns. She came to realize that her mother's expectations were influencing her and causing her distress. The goal of the therapeutic process was to reframe these thoughts so that Y.O could recognize her efforts and set realistic expectations.

Experiences with dating were also discussed. CBT techniques were used to address distorted thinking patterns, such as "mind reading" and "catastrophizing". She was taught to challenge these thoughts, to promote a more balanced perspective on how

others intend to act, and to cope with discomfort.

Homework assignments were given to help her monitor and challenge her negative thoughts. Y.O realized that not all moments have a negative aspect, which led to a more positive perspective on life. Her ongoing difficulty with maintaining focus while studying was also addressed in the therapy sessions. The White Bear Experiment showed that trying to force focus leads to more distractions, which led her to adopt a more flexible approach and use techniques such as the Pomodoro Technique (5).

Relationship issues were systematically addressed, with a particular focus on emotional aspects and uncertainties. By increasing her tolerance for uncertainty, Y.O worked on developing a more realistic approach to relationships and love.

As the sessions progressed, Y.O's self-confidence improved, and she confronted exam anxiety. A step-by-step approach to studying and handling expectations was established. In the final sessions, Y.O developed a more optimistic view of relationships. She accepted uncertainties and realized that love cannot be standardized. Realizing that the exam did not determine her future, Y.O's stress level regarding the exam decreased significantly.

Discussion

The study explores a ten-week application of CBT for GAD and test anxiety. The growing interest in CBT in Turkey has facilitated work with such cases. Nevertheless, despite its widespread adoption, its implementation suffers from limitations acknowledged by practitioners.

According to Turkcapar, the suitability of the case for CBT is a key factor that facilitates the process and enhances the outcome (6). In this context, the most significant factor that emerges is the suitability of the case for therapy. Another critical factor, as noted by Turkcapar and Sargin is the establishment of trust and a therapeutic alliance between the client and the therapist (7). The client's cooperation by actively participating in therapy, attending sessions punctually, and

refraining from disruptive behavior confirms the development of the therapeutic alliance and established trust with the therapist.

One limitation of the study is the short follow-up period and the lack of quantitative pre-test/post-test data for symptom reduction. Future research could assess the long-term effects of CBT by including follow-up and anxiety scales.

Conclusion

In conclusion, cognitive behavioral therapy is effective on test anxiety and generalized anxiety.

Limitations

Since our study is based on a single case, it has limitations in making generalizations.

Ethics Approval: All procedures performed in studies involving human participants comply with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and the 1964 Helsinki declaration and subsequent amendments or comparable ethical standards. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Istanbul Aydin University Publication Ethics Committee for Social Sciences and Humanities (Approval Date: 07/07/2023, Decision No: 2323/06).

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