

# The Effect of Spiritually Informed Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (SICBT) Group Counseling on Students' Psychological Well-Being

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to determine the effect of spiritually informed cognitive behavioral therapy (SICBT) group counseling on the psychological well-being of Grade 12 students. It utilized the pretest-posttest control group experimental design. The Flourishing Scale (FS) was used to measure psychological well-being. Two hundred sixty-six Grade 12 students were administered the pretest. Students who met the eligibility criteria were randomly assigned to the experimental group and the control group, with 10 participants and nine participants, respectively. The intervention was a six-session SICBT group counseling. The results of the study revealed that there was a significant difference in the psychological well-being of the experimental group and the control group after the intervention. The findings suggest implications in SICBT group counseling as an effective program in school guidance and counseling for the improvement of the psychological well-being of adolescents.

**Keywords:** Psychology, Spiritually Informed Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (SICBT) Group Counseling, Psychological Well-Being, Experimental Design, Negros Occidental, Philippines

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## 1.0. Introduction

Adolescence is a critical point in a person's life. As a transition period between childhood to adulthood, changes in the physical body, one's self-concept, disposition, and social relationships are evident (Myers, 2010; Smith et al., 2003). G. Stanly Hall described it as the period of "storms and stress" (Myers, 2010). Consequently, sustaining the adolescent's psychological well-being may prove to be just as challenging.

Psychological well-being integrates feelings of happiness, functioning well, and finding ways of improving life (Huppert & So, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Diener, 2000; Ryff, 1996). It is seen as an important variable in adolescent development. It correlates positively to coping well with life pressures and challenges (Hayat & Zafar, 2015; Turashvili & Japaridze, 2012). Low psychological well-being is a risk factor for psychological distress (Turashvili & Japaridze, 2012; Winefield et al., 2009). It correlates to distress, depression, anxiety (DiGenova & Romano, 2014).

Educational institutions play a significant role in developing adolescents holistically, involving physical, psychosocial, and even spiritual aspects (Sink & Devlin, 2011; Goodell & Robinson, 2008). Through the guidance and counseling services, schools need to develop programs and interventions toward the intended holistic education of their students. However, Tuliao (2014) observed that schools in the Philippines, both in basic and higher education, have a very limited number of mental health professionals that provide psychological interventions. Additionally, the prevailing stigma of receiving psychological assistance hinders students from intentionally seeking for help when they encounter mental health issues (Tuliao, 2014). Group counseling may be a potential intervention to address the limited number of mental health professionals and stigma. It allows the counselor or therapist to work with a number of students simultaneously (Corey, 2012). Likewise, the stigma of individual counseling may be reduced to the point of being diminished through the utilization of a group approach to counseling (Wade et al., 2011).

During group counseling, spiritual and religious components may be integrated while addressing students' psychological well-being. Spiritual and religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices greatly affected a person's functioning as well as well-being (Summermatter & Kaya, 2017; Pargament & Abu Raiya, 2007). A theistic spiritual strategy can be integrated with the psychodynamic, humanistic, and cognitive-behavioral counseling approaches (Richards & Bergin, 2005). This strategy postulates that people's faith in God's power help to draw on spiritual resources during treatment to cope, heal, and grow (Richards & Bergin, 2005). Building on this framework and with primary consideration to the cognitive-behavioral perspective, one specific therapeutic intervention developed is the spiritually informed cognitive behavioral therapy (SICBT; Good, 2010). This intervention is built on the assumption that both the person's problems and solutions are influenced by spiritual and religious components deemed a relevant part of the person's social and cultural context. This integration can enrich the therapeutic process (Summermatter & Kaya, 2017).

The present study deals with counseling and positive psychology. Counseling psychology is focused on the development and application counseling theories and methods usually in the educational and vocational setting (Brady-Amoon & Keefe-Cooperman, 2017), while positive psychology is concerned with the study of positive

human traits and improvement of well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) by looking into factors and or components affecting positive mental health (Huebner & Gilman, 2003; Sheldon & King, 2001). In the school setting, there should be a balanced perspective between remediating problematic behavior and developing positive human potentials (Huebner & Gilman, 2003). This entails schools having appropriate interventions to address both their students' emotional and psychological problems as well as to focus on improving students' psychological well-being. Determining the effectiveness of these interventions in improving students' psychological well-being will be beneficial, specifically, the effectiveness of a cognitive-behavioral group counseling intervention that integrates spiritual or religious aspects.

The present study is relevant, as no research of the like has been conducted in the country. The researchers believe it is important to sustain high levels of psychological well-being of senior high school students for their transition to tertiary education. With this, the researchers aimed to determine the effect of spiritually informed cognitive behavioral therapy (SICBT) group counseling on the psychological well-being of the Grade 12 students of a private school in the southern Negros Occidental, Philippines. It was hypothesized that selected variables influenced the psychological well-being of the Grade 12 students at baseline, and SICBT group counseling affected the psychological well-being of the Grade 12 students.

## **2.0. Framework of the Study**

This study is anchored on the theory of personal growth initiative. Personal growth initiative is constructed on the idea that continued personal growth throughout life is important as people encounter new challenges, transitions, and experiences (Ivtzan et al., 2011). This construct deals with higher levels of psychological well-being and lower levels of distress, such as depression and anxiety. It is highly desirable to be aware of one's motives, personality patterns, and behavior, as well as one's ability to alter these in a positive light. In the process, spirituality and religion become significant components. Religion and spirituality may bring about personal identification and transformation (Ivtzan et al., 2011). Accordingly, people begin to break their boundaries and grow. They actively and willingly create a process of change and therefore involve their personal growth initiative. Personal growth initiative can be considered a moderating factor that influences the change of attitude an individual has towards religion and spirituality following certain events.

Spirituality and religiosity are different but overlapping constructs (Summermatter & Kaya, 2017; Pargament & Abu Raiya, 2007). Spirituality refers to the person's search and connection to the sacred, involving thoughts, feelings, and behaviors relating to it, while religiosity is one's performance of religious practices and rituals usually prescribed by a certain formal religion (Summermatter & Kaya, 2017; Pargament & Abu Raiya, 2007). Most often, religion becomes a tool in realizing one's spirituality, thus resulting in a relatively indistinct overlap of the two constructs (Summermatter & Kaya, 2017).

With regard to psychological well-being, there are three prominent views, namely Diener's subjective well-being, Ryff's psychological well-being, and Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (SDT). According to Diener's subjective well-being,

psychological well-being is focused on the hedonic aspect of feeling good or being happy rather than how effective an individual is functioning (Houben et al., 2015; Bartels, Cacioppo, van Beijsterveldt & Boomsma, 2013; Diener, 2000; Diener et al., 1999; Ryff, 1989). According to Ryff's psychological well-being, well-being should not only be concerned of feeling good but also of functioning well or the eudaimonic aspect of the human person, leading to living authentically according to one's life values (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 1996; Ryff, 1989). According to Ryan and Deci's SDT, fulfilling basic psychological needs, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, is a prerequisite for psychological growth and well-being, where these needs are factors toward attaining well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Houben, Van Den Noortgate and Kuppens (2015), defined psychological well-being as a general construct that includes either or both the bearing of positive indicators of psychological adjustment and the lack of indicators of psychological maladjustment such as negative emotionality, psychopathological symptoms, and diagnoses. Psychological well-being is seen as a continuum with positive and negative indicators (Bartels et al., 2013). Therefore, high depression, anxiety, and stress may be considered indicators of low psychological well-being (Houben et al., 2015).

Considering the integration of the hedonic and eudaimonic facets of psychological well-being, Diener et al. (2010) constructed a scale that would serve as a single index of psychological well-being. It was formerly named the Psychological Well-being Scale (PWS) but later named Flourishing Scale (FS) to cover the broader aspects of well-being. This scale would measure "social-psychological prosperity," which includes constructs pointed out by Ryff, Ryan, and Deci with regards to effective human functioning. The simple definition provided by Huppert and So (2013) encapsulates the essence of what flourishing is, a combination of feeling good and functioning efficiently.

Group counseling and psychotherapy have been utilized as interventions to improve psychological well-being. According to Corey (2012), group counseling is a practical counseling intervention option as a counselor or therapist can work with many clients at a time. Group counseling could be very appropriate for many populations, especially children, adolescents, college students, and older people.

Group therapy can facilitate therapeutic factors (Yalom & Leszcz, M., 2005). These factors are instilling of hope, universality, imparting information, altruism, the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, the development of socializing techniques, imitative behavior, interpersonal learning, group cohesiveness, catharsis, and other existential factors. For the group members, there is the hope of the promise of treatment at the beginning and observed during treatment.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is considered to be one of the most preferred treatment models (Epp & Dobson, 2010). CBT focuses on the interactions between how a person thinks, feels, and behaves (Cully & Teten, 2008; CARMHA, 2007). Dobson and Dozois (2010) presented the foundational concepts of CBT, which are the assumption that cognition affects behavior; secondly, cognitive processes may be altered, and lastly, a behavior may be modified by changes in cognition. CBT also takes the position to be one of the most common treatment models where spiritual and religious components are combined (Daniels & Fitzpatrick, 2013; Paukert et al., 2009; Richards & Bergin, 2005). A theistic spiritual strategy can be integrated into CBT

(Richards & Bergin, 2005). This strategy included a theistic conceptual framework, a set of religious and spiritual therapeutic interventions, and guidelines for implementing these theistic perspectives and interventions. A number of specific therapeutic interventions were developed using this strategy, namely, spiritually informed cognitive behavioral therapy (SICBT; Good, 2010), religiously integrated cognitive behavioral therapy (RCBT; Pearce et al., 2015; Keonig et al., 2015), and spiritually oriented cognitive behavior therapy (Summermatter & Kaya, 2017). The benefits of CBT were enhanced through the integration of spiritual and religious components (Good, 2010; Pearce et al., 2015; Keonig et al., 2015; Summermatter & Kaya, 2017). The basic elements of CBT are still intact with SICBT (Good, 2010). In addition, to achieve the goals of therapy for SICBT, spiritual, or religious components such as scriptures, prayers, and meditation are used to combat negative thoughts. One of the distinct characteristics of SICBT is its emphasis on one's view of God in relation to and as part of the cognitive quadrant or the concept of how people see themselves, others, the world, and the future (Good, 2010).

Studies were conducted to determine the relationship between psychological well-being and demographic variables. Several studies found sex to be related to psychological well-being (Akhter, 2015; Bartels et al., 2013; Perez, 2012; Bhasin, Sharma & Saini, 2010; Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Goodwin & Gotlib, 2004; Allison, Roeger, Martin & Keeves, 2001) while others found otherwise (Suleiman et al., 2017; Cheung et al., 2016; Sharma, 2014; Thayer, Rossy, Ruiz-Padial & Johnsen, 2003).

With regards to senior high school track, Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, and Nurmi (2008) found that those belonging to the academic track experienced more exhaustion at school than those on a vocational track. Similarly, Salmela-Aro and Tynkkynen (2012) found that stress and burnout are higher for those in the academic track. According to Kiuru, Leskinen, Nurmi, and Salmela-Aro (2011), learning difficulties and feelings of inadequacy in school were negatively associated with emotional distress such as depression.

Several types of research on well-being also explored family-related variables. Bell and Bell (2009) found that family connections have a positive link to well-being. Bell and Bell (2005) concluded that the nature of the family systems experienced during adolescent years was associated with well-being even at midlife. Crespo et al. (2011) concluded that family cohesion is positively associated with young people's reported well-being measures. Ryff (2014) confirmed that well-being is positively associated with family role involvement. Bernardi et al. (2013) concluded that negative outcomes were more associated with single-parent families as well as with stepfamily. Laukkanen, Hakko, Riiipinen, and Riala (2016) concluded that depression in adolescents was significantly associated with single-parent family background. Galambos, Barker, and Krahn (2006) concluded that increases in social connections and support were also associated with improved psychological well-being. Van Oort, Verhulst, Ormel, and Huizink (2010) found that parental stress predicted the development of future anxiety among children. Schotanus-Dijkstra et al. (2016) found flourishing to be associated with the respondent's situational factors of social support and their experience of positive life-events.

Economic status was found to have a significant relationship with psychological well-being (Teh et al., 2015; Shamsuddin et al., 2013).

With regard to the effect of group therapy and counseling, Shechtman (2014) concluded, from her review of large-scale studies, that group interventions served as effective counseling and treatment models. Group therapy was found to be effective among drug-dependents (Suresh & Sachin (2014); Crits-Christoph et al., 2013). Pernebo and Almqvist (2016) and Shechtman and Ifargan (2009) found group counseling to be effective among children. Farnoodian (2016) found that utilizing group intervention anchored on the reality therapy approach improved the self-esteem of adolescents. Tiuraniemi and Korhola (2009) concluded that group therapy could aid in the treatment of depression among students. However, Weiss, Westerhof, and Bohlmeijer (2016) found individual counseling more effective compared to that of group therapy.

Studies also found significant positive associations between religiosity and some psychological well-being components (Greenfield, Vaillant, & Marks, 2009; Frazier, Mintz, & Mobley, 2005). Good (2010), which employed a spiritually informed cognitive-behavioral therapy (SICBT), found that the integrative approach was useful in the treatment of major depressive disorder and the development of psychological health. Paukert et al. (2009) concluded that spiritual/religious integration was beneficial when working with depressed elderly. Daniels and Fitzpatrick (2013) pointed out growing evidence of practitioners integrating religious and spiritual components in their therapy. However, Viftrup, Hvidt, and Buus (2013) recommended that further studies needed to be conducted to validate the claims of this integration.

The findings of this study will be valuable to the students, parents, school administrators, mental health professionals, religious sector, the government, the general public, and the present and future researchers with regard to the effectiveness of SICBT group counseling in improving the psychological well-being of Grade 12 students.

### **3.0. Methods**

This study aimed to determine the effect of spiritually informed cognitive behavioral therapy (SICBT) group counseling on the psychological well-being of the Grade 12 students. The researchers employed the correlational research design, which allows determining the relationships between variables (Ardales, 2008). The experimental research design was also utilized, which intends to determine causal relationships. Specifically, the pretest-posttest control group design was utilized, which requires random selection and assignment of participants to the comparison groups (Beins & McCarthy, 2012; Ardales, 2008). The researcher utilized two groups for comparison—an experimental group and a control group.

The participants of this study were the Grade 12 students of a private school in Kabankalan City, Negros Occidental, Philippines enrolled during the Academic Year 2017-2018. The Grade 12 population determined the demographic characteristics and baseline measurements. The total population is 326 students. During the data gathering schedule, only 274 students were present. Due to missing data, only 266 completed questionnaires were considered valid, making up for 82% retrieval rate.

To gather the required data, the researchers used the Flourishing Scale (FS) to measure psychological well-being. The FS is a newer version of the former Psychological Well-being Scale (PWB) (Diener et al., 2009). The FS is an 8-item self-

report questionnaire. It provides an assessment of the overall psychological well-being as it explores aspects of human functioning, such as having meaning and purpose in life, self-efficacy, and the establishment of positive human relationships. All the items of the scale are stated in a positive direction and are answered on a 7-point scale ranging from Strong Disagreement to Strong Agreement. The lowest possible score is eight and the highest is 56. Higher scores indicate a more positive view of the noted aspects of functioning, making up for a single positive indicator of psychological well-being, which is flourishing. Higher flourishing indicates that the individual perceives success in areas of her or his life, such as relationships, purpose, self-respect, competence, and optimism (Diener et al., 2009).

The sampling technique employed was the non-probability purposive sampling, where the selection of the participants meets the purpose of the study (Beins & McCarthy, 2012; Ardales, 2008). Eligibility criteria were the score of the Flourishing Scale (FS; Diener et al., 2010), a score of slight lack of flourishing to extremely low flourishing, respectively.

After securing approval from proper school authorities, the number of the Grade 12 students, along with their available vacant schedules, was determined for the pretest administration. Grade 12 students meeting the eligibility criteria were determined based on the pretest results. There were initially 29 participants who were eligible and randomly assigned to the comparison groups, with 15 participants for the experimental group and 14 for the control group. Only 19 participants were given permission by their parents to participate, ten students in the experimental group and nine in the control group.

The intervention was a SICBT group counseling adapted from Good (2010). This SICBT was composed of six sessions. The sessions were conducted by a Registered Psychologist and facilitated by the researcher. Each session lasted 60 to 90 minutes. The initial session, Session One, was the orientation and goal-setting stage. During Session Two, the participants were informed in detail about psychological well-being and were provided with specific Bible readings. For Session Three, the participants focused on their personal belief system and identified their cognitive distortions and the strategies to combat them. Bible meditation was introduced as a resource. Participants were assigned to practice identifying their triggers, cognitive distortions, and the different strategies of combating their cognitive distortions. Session Four was devoted to the presentation of the different behavioral strategies, particularly goal-setting and problem-solving skill. In Session Five, the participants learned other strategies to improve psychological well-being, especially relaxation breathing. Participants were taught to incorporate healthy lifestyle changes. Spiritual elements such as the benefits of prayer, Christian music, meditation, strengthening relationship with God were discussed. Participants were assigned to practice the new strategies and to plan for changes in their lifestyles. For the concluding session, Session Six, participants reviewed their learning from previous sessions, and the SICBT was terminated.

Data gathered were analyzed using descriptive, relational, comparative, and qualitative analytical schemes depending on the research objective concerned. The mean was utilized as a measure of central tendency. Chi-square was used to determine associations and Fisher Exact Test for smaller samples. The Independent

and Dependent t-tests were used to compare differences in means. The effect size was also computed to identify practical significance. The researcher utilized qualitative analysis, specifically the thematic approach, to establish the themes from the data gathered from the focus groups.

#### 4.0. Results

##### ***Psychological well-being of the Grade 12 students***

As a group ( $M = 44.36, SD = 7.20$ ), the Grade 12 students reported being “flourishing” as shown in Table 1. Based on the sex, academic track, family structure, and economic status, the students were “flourishing.”

**Table 1.** *Flourishing Level of the Population in terms of Demographics*

	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
As a whole	44.36	7.20	Flourishing
Sex			
Male (n = 101)	43.57	8.03	Flourishing
Female (n = 165)	44.84	6.62	Flourishing
Senior High Track			
ABM (n = 91)	45.67	6.24	Flourishing
HUMSS (n = 32)	43.28	6.24	Flourishing
STEM (n = 120)	44.42	8.11	Flourishing
TechVoc (n = 23)	40.35	5.42	Flourishing
Family Structure			
Intact (n = 205)	44.88	6.75	Flourishing
Non-intact (n = 61)	42.62	8.39	Flourishing
Economic Status			
Low (n = 105)	42.88	7.58	Flourishing
Middle (n = 81)	45.69	6.74	Flourishing
Upper (n = 80)	44.96	6.88	Flourishing

Note. Population,  $N = 266$

##### ***Relationships among the demographic characteristics and the flourishing level of the Grade 12 students***

There were no significant relationships among the demographic characteristics and the flourishing level of the Grade 12 students at baseline, namely: sex ( $r_{pb} = .09, p = .16$ ) and family structure [ $X^2(2, N = 266) = 2.854, p > .05$ ], however, between senior high track and the flourishing level [ $X^2(6, N = 266) = 15.622, p < .05$ ] and economic status and the flourishing level of the Grade 12 students [ $X^2(4, N = 266) = 11.920, p < .05$ ], there were significant relationships.

##### ***Difference between the flourishing level of the experimental group and the control group before and after the intervention***

There was no significant difference in the flourishing level between the experimental group and the control group at baseline [ $t(17) = .755, p > .05, CI.95 -2.53,$

-5.35]. However, there was a statistical difference between their flourishing level after the SICBT group counseling [ $t(17) = 1.775, p > .05, CI.95 -1.17, -13.54$ ]. Further, Cohen's effect size value ( $d = 0.79$ ) suggests a large effect. There was a significant difference in the flourishing level of the experimental group before and after the SICBT group counseling [ $t(9) = -5.864, p < .05, CI.95 -12.47, -5.53$ ]. Likewise, there was a significant difference in the flourishing level of the control group before and after the SICBT group counseling [ $t(8) = -1.572, p > .05, CI.95 -10.42, -1.97$ ].

## 5.0. Discussion

According to Sun et al. (2016), functioning and feeling well aspect among females were related to their tendency to be more relational and compassionate. Salmela-Aro et al. (2008) explained that certain career paths pose a challenge to perform better, thus resulting in emotional distress, which can be a threat to a functioning and feeling well. Bernardi et al. (2013) affirmed that those belonging to intact families had a higher level of flourishing. Consistent with the findings of Schotanus-Dijkstra et al. (2016), those in the middle and higher economic status groups have higher levels of flourishing.

The result of the study is consistent with the findings of Sharma (2014), who found no significant difference in the psychological well-being of males and females. However, Sun et al. (2016), Bartels et al. (2013), Akhter (2015), and Perez (2012) found that sex is associated with positive measures of psychological well-being.

The result is supported by findings of Salmela-Aro et al. (2008), who found that certain career paths pose a challenge to perform better, thus resulting in feelings of stress and exhaustion. This can serve as a threat to functioning and feeling well, which is also about flourishing.

The result is consistent with studies that found that the family structure is not related to flourishing, rather the dynamics of social relationships (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2016; Ryff, 2014; Crespo et al., 2011; Bell & Bell, 2009).

Schotanus-Dijkstra et al. (2016) confirm the result of the study. According to Schotanus-Dijkstra et al. (2016), situational factors such as having employment and higher education, leading to a better economic state, were significantly related to flourishing.

The significant result of this present investigation with regards to the experimental group is consistent with the findings of other researchers that group counseling can improve psychological well-being. It can enable people to manage their problems, and emotional distresses, leading to improved psychological well-being (Farnoodian, 2016; Shechtman, 2014; Suresh and Sachin, 2014; Crits-Christoph et al., 2013). The theory of personal growth initiative (Ivtzan et al., 2011) is affirmed as the change was brought about in the participants' psychological well-being.

Moreover, the personal growth initiative (Ivtzan et al., 2011) serves as an explanation that group counseling and therapy provided an avenue for the participants to break through personal boundaries and experience personal improvement. The spiritual integration played a part in the change process, as it was a relevant element in treatment to bring about healing and hope (Richards and Bergin, 2005). Group

counseling provided them knowledge and skills that enabled them to improve their present psychological well-being. The result of the study confirms the proposition of Marogna & Caccamo (2014) and Yalom (2005) that group counseling therapeutic factors, especially with regard to the development of problem-solving skills, reduces distress.

## 6.0. Conclusion

Screening for psychological well-being should be available for Senior High School students as they prepare for their tertiary education. Knowledge of their psychological well-being will provide Senior High School students a better understanding of their mental health issues. Senior High School students in need of intervention should be encouraged to participate in spiritually integrated group counseling program when available. The Flourishing Scale (FS) is a good instrument to measure psychological well-being.

Parents need to be continuously supportive of their developing adolescents. Teachers need to be aware of the different risk factors affecting their students' psychological well-being in order to take on a more preventive stance, and school administrators need to have policies and programs in place to enhance their students' psychological well-being, considering making SICBT group counseling available to the students as part of guidance and counseling services.

Mental health professionals can utilize SICBT group counseling as a stand-alone intervention or adjunct to other treatment modalities. Mental health professionals may need training in spiritual integration with the help of the religious sector. The passing of the Mental Health Law in the Philippines may prove to be a concrete step towards addressing this need. Furthermore, this law will serve as a means of providing the general public with an efficient health program.

This present study focused on the utilization of SICBT group counseling to Grade 12 students. It is recommended to investigate the effectiveness of group counseling, especially SICBT group counseling, to other age groups. It is also recommended to explore the relationship of psychological well-being to other variables such as family dynamics, school achievement, and religiosity.

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