

## Original Article

# The effectiveness of assertiveness training on social anxiety and coping with stress among high school female students

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### Abstract

Social anxiety disorder is diagnosed based on a strong and persistent fear of performance in social situations. Research has shown that, it is common, complex, and debilitating. This disorder persists if left untreated. Adolescents with social anxiety disorders suffer from poor academic performance and mental health. The present study was performed in order to investigate the effectiveness of assertiveness on social anxiety and coping with stress among high school female students. In this quasi-experimental study (pre-test and post-test with control group), the population included all high school female students in Roudbar, Iran. Among 168 students, 30 students who got scores above 30 in the Watson and Friend Social Anxiety Questionnaire were randomly selected and divided into an experimental group (n = 15) and a control group (n = 15). In addition to the Social Anxiety Questionnaire, the Folkman and Lazarus Coping Strategies Questionnaire was also administered. The results demonstrated that assertiveness training is effective on social anxiety and coping with stress among high school female students ( $p < .001$ ). Based on these findings, it can be concluded that assertiveness training is effective in reducing anxiety and increasing students' coping strategies.

### Keywords

Assertiveness  
Social anxiety  
Coping with stress

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## Introduction

Social anxiety is characterized by a pronounced and persistent fear of one or more social situations in which people feel that they are judged by their actions and behavior so they avoid social situations and interpersonal relationships (Stravynski, 2004). A person with social anxiety does not like to start a relationship with others and avoids any situation that may be exposed to judgment and feeling unusual fear or stability (Amali, Mahiar & Bolhari, 2013). Watson and Friend (Shokri, 2011) have defined social anxiety as the experience of stress, discomfort, avoidance of social situations and fear of negative evaluation by others. Miler (Butler, 2012) defines social anxiety as a definite and chronic fear of one or more social situations in which the individual feels that they are under others scrutiny and scared of doing something that

is embarrassing or demeaning.

Butler defines social anxiety as the result of biological preparation for stimuli of rejection, criticism, and anger. He suggests that we all have a distinct natural trait that makes us feel nervous or threatened by others judgment. People with social anxiety often avoid making eye contact with others without realizing that they are doing it. Barlow's model of anxiety (Hoffman, Oto, 2011) about social anxiety is based on the hypothesis that relatively small negative life events in performance with social interaction can lead to anxiety.

Anxiety is a necessary response to stress in which a person prepares to face danger, which is a rational and even vital response. Adolescents, like adults, sometimes experience stress in their daily lives (Saeedi, 2011). Their reactions to different types of stress are variable. These reactions are called coping (Dehestani, 2011). Coping

refers to the methods used to change or interpret conditions so that they are more desirable and less threatening (Lazarus, 1993). In general, three coping methods have always been considered by researchers. Problem-based coping, its main feature is direct cognitive and behavioral efforts to reduce stress or increase stress management. Emotional coping techniques in which the person is focused on him/herself and tries his/her best to reduce the unpleasant feelings. There is also an avoidant-based coping method, the main feature of which is to avoid facing the stressors (Besharat, 2007).

Stress is an inevitable part of human life and a mental phenomenon (Azad, 2015). In order to deal with stress among students, methods of teaching social skills and assertiveness have been used (Tavakoli, 2009). Assertiveness is the correct understanding of rules, customs and the right way to communicate with others (Garcia Lopez, 2015). Today, the word "stress" is widely used in everyday life (Amiri, 2015), and in contrast, assertiveness is a key to interpersonal behavior and human relations (Rahimian Booger, 2008). In addition, the use of these methods has not been emphasized to treat anxiety disorders and fears of children and adolescents (Rahimi, 2007). In various studies conducted on students, the effectiveness of assertiveness methods in reducing social anxiety and increasing social skills has been confirmed (Roderick, 1999; Rahimian, 2008; Shekari, 2008; Hedayat Safa, 2010; Mehrabizadeh, 2010; Rashidzadeh, 2012). Regarding the necessity of these trainings, it can be said that students face different stresses, especially during adolescence. The need for acceptance in adolescents makes them prone to social anxiety. Lack of exercise management can lead to anxiety, isolation, aggression or incorrect coping skills (Saeedi, 2008).

Assertiveness is an important social skill that improves personal health and is necessary for initiating and maintaining supportive interpersonal relationships and promotes better emotional health (Güven, 2010). Assertiveness means the ability to honestly express opinions, feelings, thoughts and attitudes without feeling anxious and based on social norms (Dehestani, 2011). Lange and Jakubowski (Rakos, 1991) define assertiveness as taking one's rights and expressing one's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in an appropriate, direct, and honest way so that the rights of others are not violated.

Assertiveness training is rooted in behavioral psychology. This topic was first considered by Salter in 1949. He was influenced by Powell's thoughts on arousal and inhibition. Salter believed that some people were more action-oriented and highly motivated. Others are more prone to neuroticism, and hence in inhibition state. Salter's meaning of arousal is a state in which people can do their best, either cognitively or emotionally (Faghirpour, 2007). Wolpe (1985) showed that in anxious situations, patience prevents anxiety. In addition, the client finds that in such situations, behavior based on

assertiveness is easier. We do not fight anxiety, we just act by assertiveness (Red Rick Graham and Sean Rice, 1999).

Assertiveness training is one of the behavioral therapy methods, the components of which include guidance, role-playing, role modeling, practice and visual and objective behavioral review. This training consists of techniques that are used to relieve anxiety caused by social interactions. Using these techniques, a person's anxiety is eliminated due to the inability to present ideas to others (Shafiabadi, 2011).

Since learning assertive skills leads to a sense of empowerment, more self-confidence, stress reduction and prevention of various social injuries, it is considered as an important skill (Hejazi, 2005). The use of assertive skills plays an important role, especially to avoid high-risk and harmful behaviors, and for adolescents who are often pressured by peers due to their specific age characteristics (Mahdavi, 2011). Due to the importance of these issues, the present study aimed to determine the effectiveness of assertiveness on social anxiety and coping with stress among high school girls.

## Method

### Participants

The research method was quasi-experimental with pretest-posttest design with a control group. The independent variable was assertiveness training. The statistical population of the present study consisted of female high school students in Roudbar. The study sample included 30 female second grade high school students. First, two high schools were selected based on simple random sampling method, which had 168 second-year high school students. All students answered the Social Anxiety Questionnaire. Subjects who scored higher than the mean were selected, who were eventually divided into an experimental ( $n = 15$ ) and a control ( $n=15$ ) group. The Watson and Friend Social Anxiety Questionnaire and the Folkman and Lazarus coping strategies were administered as pre-test and post-test scales.

Assertiveness training sessions were conducted during eight 90-minute weekly sessions. The beginning of the training program was accompanied by a pre-test and the end of the sessions was accompanied by a post-test. A summary of the sessions is provided in Table.

### Instrument

The research instruments were the Watson and Friend Social Anxiety Questionnaire and the Folkman and Lazarus Coping Strategies Questionnaire. Social Anxiety Questionnaire with 28 items by Watson and Friend (Kikhaei, 2012) was presented in 1969. The questionnaire measures 583 items of the three subscales of avoidance, social distress and fear of negative evaluation. In Watson and Friend's research, the retest coefficient of the Avoidance and Social Distress subscale was 0.79 and the Fear of Negative Assessment subscale was 0.94. Kaikhaie

Farzaneh (2011) reported coefficients of 0.79, 0.84, and 0.64 respectively, for the whole scale and two subscales of avoidance and social distress and fear of negative evaluation, using Cronbach's alpha method.

The Folkman and Lazarus Coping Strategies Questionnaire has 66 items that measure eight coping methods. Each item has four options and is assigned a score of zero to three. Lazarus has achieved Cronbach's alpha of 0.79, 0.72 and 0.86, respectively, for problem-focused coping strategy, emotion-focused coping, and general coping (Alilou, 2012). In Davoodi's study in Iran, a sample of 750 middle-aged couples and a sample of 763 second- and third-year high school students were standardized. Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranges from 61% to 79%.

**Table 1.** Summary of assertiveness training sessions

Session	Session Description
<b>First session</b>	Introducing students to each other, defining assertiveness and discussing its necessity and benefits.
<b>Second session</b>	Familiarity with the types of passive and aggressive behaviors and distinguishing the behaviors associated with their assertiveness.
<b>Third session</b>	Discussing about the benefits and disadvantages of assertive, aggressive, and passive behaviors.
<b>Fourth session</b>	Anger and aggression and the emotions associated with it, how to express anger
<b>Fifth session</b>	Ways to deal with anger, using mental review and role-playing methods
<b>Sixth session</b>	Saying yes and no to the students' experiences and visualizing the various situations associated with it
<b>Seventh session</b>	Effective and appropriate treatment of criticism, the characteristics of an effective criticism, techniques for dealing with biased criticism
<b>Eighth session</b>	Discussing and concluding and reviewing the contents of past sessions, post-test

(d) Method of implementation: First, before conducting research the relevant permits were obtained from education department, by referring to schools, selecting samples and placing them in experimental and control groups, the research process began. Thus, before the training interventions, the research questionnaires were completed by the experimental and control groups, and then the subjects of the experimental group received experimental interventions, while the control.

## Result

In the results section, the descriptive findings of the research were reviewed and then the assumptions of parametric tests and finally the inferential findings of the research were presented.

**Table 2.** Descriptive indicators of test scores in pre-test, post-test stages

SD (Standard Deviation)	M (Mean)	Group	Dependent Variable
5.71	22	Pretest	Assertiveness
1.41	21.90	Posttest	
6.64	21.87	Pretest	Interpersonal relationships
1.55	31.73	Posttest	
5.26	39.60	Pretest	Control
1.71	39.83	Posttest	
6.27	43.73	Pretest	Assertiveness
2.11	38.53	Posttest	
7.64	40.20	Pretest	Interpersonal relationships
		Posttest	
8.79	29.40	Pretest	Control
2.43	37.89	Posttest	
4.30	24.07	Pretest	Assertiveness
1.48	24.16	Posttest	
6.81	20.73	Pretest	Interpersonal relationships
1.62	20.69	Posttest	
5.58	37.4	Pretest	Control
1.79	37.35	Posttest	

As can be seen in the table, after adjusting the scores, the experimental groups and the control group differ in the mean of the dependent variables. To examine whether this difference is statistically significant or not is due to the training effect, Manqua analysis was performed using Ben Foroni correction method.

**Table 3.** Effect size test based on

Size effect level	Significance	Degree of freedom-error	Degree of freedom-group	f	Value	Effect
0.58	0.001	74	6	16.77	0.180	Wilkes lambda

As can be seen in Table 2, the effect of assertiveness training and interpersonal relationships in a combined variable (coping with anxiety and stress) with a size effect of 0.58,  $0.1 \text{ lambda} = p < 0.001$ ,  $f(6,74) = 6.77$  had a significant effect on social anxiety and coping strategies. Eta's quadratic square shows the intensity of this effect (0.58), which indicates a very high effect.

**Table 4.** Results of the effect of training in assertiveness and interpersonal relationships on social anxiety

Sig	F	Ms	df	ss	Change Sources
0.001	32.99	936.55	2	1873.10	Social Anxiety
		28.37	39	1106.88	Error
0.007	5.63	321.87	2	643.73	Problem solving strategy
		57.22	39	2231.68	Error
0.001	19.96	624.66	2	1249.33	Excitement-based strategy
		31.29	39	1120.50	Error

With respect to Table 3, training about assertiveness and interpersonal relationships has been effective on social anxiety with  $f(2, 39) = 32.99$  and  $p < 0.001$ . Training about assertiveness and interpersonal relationships have been effective on the problem-based strategy with  $f(2, 39) = 5.63$  and  $p < 0.007$ . Training about assertiveness and interpersonal relationships have been effective on excitement-based strategy with  $f(2, 39) = 19.69$  and  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 5.** Post hoc test for assertiveness and interpersonal relationships on social anxiety

Significance level	Standard Error	Mean differences	
0.001	1.99	-9.38	<b>Social anxiety</b>
0.13	2.82	4.38	<b>Problem based strategy</b>
0.11	2.09	3.46	<b>Excitement based strategy</b>

The post hoc test compares the means of training group of assertiveness to the interpersonal relationships on anxiety and it shows that the mean difference (-9.38) is statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, it can be concluded that assertiveness training has a greater effect on social anxiety than interpersonal relationships. In the post hoc test, comparing the mean of the training group of assertiveness and interpersonal relationships on problem-based strategy shows that the mean difference (4.38) is not statistically significant ( $p < 0.13$ ). Therefore, it can be concluded that assertiveness and interpersonal relationships training have the same effect on problem-based strategy. The post hoc test comparing the mean of the training group of assertiveness and interpersonal relationships on excitement-based strategy shows that the mean difference (3.46) is not statistically significant ( $p < 0.11$ ). Therefore, it can be concluded that training for assertiveness and interpersonal relationships have the same effect on excitement-based strategy.

**Table 6.** Test results of the effect of interpersonal relationships training on social anxiety

Size effect	sig	F	ms	Df	ss	Change sources
0.21	0.02	6.7	182.72	1	182.72	<b>Social Anxiety Error</b>
0.23	0.01	7.72	133.414	1	133.414	<b>Problem solving strategy Error</b>
0.54	0.001	29.43	916.066	1	916.066	<b>Excitement-based strategy Error</b>
			31.125	25	778.116	

According to the results of Table 7, interpersonal relationship training has been effective on social anxiety with  $f(1, 25) = 6.7$  and  $p < 0.02$ . Hence, it can be concluded that the research hypothesis that “interpersonal relationship training is effective on social anxiety” is

approved. Eta parabolic square shows the intensity of this effect (0.21) which indicates the intensity of the effect is very high. Therefore, it can be concluded that the research hypothesis that “interpersonal relationship training is effective on problem-based strategy” is approved. Eta parabolic square shows the intensity of this effect (0.23), which indicates the intensity of the effect is very high. Interpersonal relationship training has been effective on excitement-based strategy with  $f(1, 25) = 29.43$  and  $p < 0.001$ . Therefore, it can be concluded that the research hypothesis that “interpersonal relationship training is effective on excitement-based strategy” is approved. Eta parabolic square shows the intensity of this effect (0.54) which indicates the intensity of the effect is very high

## Discussion

The present study was performed in order to evaluate the effectiveness of assertiveness training on social anxiety and coping with stress among high school female students. The results of the analysis showed that assertiveness reduces social anxiety and increases coping skills. The results of the present study are consistent with the results of the research of Rabie et al. (2013), Mehrabizadeh et al. (2010), Torkaman Malayeri (2004), Rahimi et al. (2005), Mazraeh et al. (2015), MirzaKhani et al. (2015). Many adolescents despite their successes in life are still vulnerable in the face of everyday problems and issues. As previous researchers have shown the effectiveness of assertiveness training in reducing social anxiety in their research. The effect of assertiveness training in reducing girls' social anxiety can be explained by the fact that patients with social anxiety lack the ability of self-expression (Amiri, 2015) Also, training assertiveness skills have a positive effect on reducing anxiety (Kerns et al., 2015). These people become shy and withdrawn due to fear of social interactions and lose the assertiveness to comment and express their opinions. During assertiveness training sessions, these people learn how to say no and reject the irrational requests of others. Also, they realize how to say yes and communicate properly. In addition, these trainings allow the individuals to control their environment in a better and more positive way and prevent unreasonable anxiety (Shafiabadi, 2011). Self-expression is a technique to relieve the anxiety caused by social interactions and social phobia. During the self-expression training program, through providing the necessary information and performing appropriate tasks such as proper social interactions, practicing the tone of voice, body movements, and communicating with the eye, it reduces anxiety and combats unrealistic expectations and value and moral considerations in the participants (Lotfi Kashani & Vaziri, 2017). A person who has the ability to express himself, accepts responsibility

for his behaviors and choices, has sufficient self-esteem, has positive feelings, thoughts and attitudes towards himself and others, and his behavior with himself and others is explicit and honest (Townend, 2012). This person uses communication methods that enable him to maintain his self-esteem, pursue satisfaction and achieves his desires (Bolton, translated by Sohrabi & Hayat Roshanaei, 2015). People who have self-expression demonstrate high levels of self-confidence and self-esteem (Raudsepp, 2005). The ability to express oneself and express one's desires is very important in children. Some children have not learned expressive behaviors and do not have the power to say "no" and cannot interact with assertiveness with other people (VanGundy, 2002). It seems that one of the factors that plays an important role in the development of social anxiety is the feeling of low self-efficacy in social situations. Low self-efficacy is rooted in one's thoughts. Clark and Wells (Hoffman, Oto 2011) discussed about four pathological processes in patients with social anxiety. First, they pay more attention to themselves when they enter a social situation. Second, people with social anxiety use a variety of immunizing behaviors to reduce the risk of rejection. Third, Clark and Wells believe that these people instill in themselves a functional impairment due to anxiety, in addition to overestimating the extent to which others negatively evaluate their performance. The fourth pathological process of people with social anxiety is that they think carefully about the situation before and after a social event, and their focus is more on previous failures, their negative self-image in the situation, poor performance and rejection. In explaining the effectiveness of assertiveness on coping methods with stress, the findings of this study are consistent with the findings of Rouhani (2011), Brown (1980), Rabie et al. (2012) found out that assertiveness training reduces students' stress and anxiety. Also, Rouhani et al. concluded that assertiveness training increases the worker's ability to cope with stress, which can be said that assertiveness increases self-efficacy, internal control and self-confidence. Positive psychological factors resulting from assertive behaviors make a person cope better with stressful situations and try to deal with existing stresses. Assertiveness training teaches individuals how to express their true feelings honestly, take their rights without regarding the rights of others, and how to express their views and opinions, also stress sources are eliminated in this way and the person becomes calm (Rouhani, 1390). Coping behaviors works better for events that are beyond the control of individuals. With the help of mental cohesion and emotional calm, the source of stress is better identified and can be controlled (Brown, 1980). An assertive person feels better by

avoiding embarrassment and anxiety, and makes them more comfortable with themselves, and allows others to experience being more comfortable with them. Therefore, it can be concluded that self-expression skills training is an effective and useful method for shy people, so that they can easily express their positive or negative feelings, express themselves and acquire the necessary skills for self-confidence and self-belief. Considering that the higher self-esteem and self-confidence play an important role in improving students' academic achievement (Piri, 2004), it is suggested that some sessions for teaching assertiveness skills by school principals and counselors be included in programs of students' leisure time. This study also had its limitations. Since the data of this study were collected using a questionnaire and self-report questionnaires are prone to distortion mainly due to unconscious findings, this may have made.

## Conclusion

In the present study assertiveness training was based on the standard training protocol to reduce anxiety and increase coping with stress. Despite its significant results, the present study was also associated with limitations. The research was conducted only on female students, and caution should be exercised in generalizing the results to male students. In the future research, follow-up tests should be performed to ensure the stability of changes in the subjects.

## Disclosure statement

The authors of this article declare that there was no conflict of interest.

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