



Religious Cognitive Behavioral Therapy As A Strategy For Eliminating Academic Burnout Among Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

The present study explored the usefulness of religious cognitive behavioral therapy (RCBT) in limiting impacts of academic burnout among students. The sample consisted on 87 college level undergraduate students of age 17-21 years who were identified as religious (n=40) and nonreligious (n=47). They were given RCBT with repeated assessments of academic burnout at intervals i.e. pre-intervention (T1), intervention after one week (T2) and follow-up intervention after 12 weeks (T3). The analysis of variance was conducted on academic burnout between religious and non-religious students across T1, T2 and T3 intervals. It demonstrated the effect of time interval significantly by substantiating interaction of student's type and the interval. Results of Wilks' Lambda and partial eta squared suggested a decrease in academic burnout across the three time intervals for religious students as compared to their counterparts' i.e. non-religious students. Results of the study determined efficacy of RCBT and with implications for both teachers and psychotherapists to improve the students' academic performance.

Keywords: Academic Burnout, Religiosity, Religious Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Stress

Introduction

In today's age of competition the academic environment of educational institutions appear to be stressful for adolescent students. At college level students have their dreams and aspirations for their practical lives. They have high ambitions and desires among them academic excellence seems to be one of the natural drives. At this stage majority of the students spend most of their time in studying at their schools, colleges or even at privately managed academies to achieve higher grades in examinations (Lee and Larson 2000). They think higher grades as a surety for getting into well reputed top ranked universities to secure their future (Lee 2003). They may experience some psychological and mental disorders while studying under such stressful conditions. These and alike states repeatedly arise when there is an academic competition among fellows at their respective schools or colleges (Statistics Korea 2010) with enhanced sensitivity.

Academic burnout is a state wherein a student feels physically, mentally, and emotionally ran out, emptied or exhausted from his/her studies due to the stress of over academic work. Academic burnout usually occurs when a student remains engaged in a lot of study stuff without having any break or without caring of stress levels. There has been a need to study the academic burnout among students due to the fact that students undergo a high pressure of competition in academic environments at schools or colleges (Shin et al. 2011). Owing to this schools and colleges become stressful places for students. Therefore, burning out from school is very common and generally happens at high schools' and even at college level. Generally, students experience stress or stressful states near or during the tests and examinations or when they are waiting for results.

The concept of burnout has been described by Malach-Pines (2005) as a state of complex exhaustion of one's emotions, de-personalization and having no or less sense of one's personal achievements. In education particularly to the context of students, it explains disturbance of their emotions, cynicism and inefficiency or less efficiency in academic matters resulting in repeated stress and failure (Schaufeli et al. 2002). This emotive state of disturbance is considered as extreme fatigue because of high academic expectations; while cynicism is regarded as feelings of detachment among students towards their study and assignments; whereas, academic inefficacy implies students' perception of incompetency for doing academic work (Shin et al. 2011).

Religion, religiosity or religious practices among school and college students appear an interesting area of research. Students who were high on religiosity appeared to be engaged more in their academic activities and worked hard in their schools and colleges (Muller and Ellison 2001) and they secured high grades in examinations. Donahue and Benson (1995) found students' consistent participation in religious activities to be related with their higher attainment or higher GPAs compared to those who did not

attended religious rituals or practice. The scores of those students who attended such services frequently were higher in undergraduate than their counterparts who kept themselves away from religious practices or attended off and on (Regnerus 2000). Another study demonstrated that religious students or religiously practicing students appeared to be harder working and secured higher grades than non-religious students (Loury 2005).

Similarly, the study of Fan (2008) affirmed a positive correlation between academic attainment of [college] students and their regular attendance in religious activities. Even so, the students who regularly participated in religious services during the period of their early adolescence spent significantly more time for education by their early adulthood as compared to those who never attended any religious lesson (Loury 2005), ritual, service or activity. Obviously it suggests that non-religious people [students] or who are religiously unaffiliated appear to be more likely to have low level of education as compared to those who have affiliation with any religion as they tend to have high level of education (Regnerus 2000). A student's frequent attendance in religious activities affects his attendance in school or college, academic performance, and the time duration spent in learning –it is further associated with low rate of becoming deviant (Glanville et al. 2008). Regular religious participation is correlated with greater school engagements and lower rate of dropout (Cosden et al. 2004). In a study Koenig (2009) asserted that spirituality and religion can limit the negative effects of burnout among medical students. Also religion can be a protective factor against burnout among healthcare workers (Holland and Neimyer 2005) and human service [providers or] workers (Golden et al. 2003). Likewise, George et al. (2002) affirmed that one's engagements in religious activities improve his/her mental and physical with endurance. Hence one may say that religious coping strategies can be useful in limiting stress among college students and academic burnout. Also, Holland and Neimyer (2005) described in their study that religiosity appeared to lessen the physical, emotional, and cognitive syndromes of burnout among [college] students. Another study reported that spirituality and religion were found to be associated with less fatigue and high empathy among patients (Kash et al. 2000).

The above discussion leads towards the belief that student counselors and psychologists should assist students generally and college students particularly in getting awareness about the positive potential effects of religious practices. They should also help students in adopting positive religious coping strategies for the positive gains. Interventions incorporating religious beliefs primarily hold emphasis on religious services –teaching of religious concepts and praying together with clients [students] (Moon et al. 1993; Ball and Goodyear 1991). Religious interventions used for students focus on guiding them not to conceive or implement idea of self-punishment as it may lead to suicidal ideation. Exline et al. (2000) affirmed such findings wherein religious guilt was found a predicting factor for depression, anxiety, and suicidal sentiments. Kooistra and Pargament (1999) also pointed

out that negative religious coping raises feelings of anxiety and lowering emotional wellbeing.

As adolescence appears as a significant stage in students' lives; hence, it needs for exploring their engagements particularly, in religious practices and their patterns of using coping ways to avoid the stress. Therefore, examining the existence of religiosity among students and its contribution to academic burnout was the focus of this study. Further, it employed the religious cognitive behavior therapy (RCBT) for deep understanding of the adolescents' religiosity role in limiting impact of burnout. It compared those students who frequently observed religious activities and those who did not in terms of their burnout across three time intervals. It was assumed that RCBT will be effective in turning down the academic burnout not only for religious students but also for non-religious students over time.

Method

Participants

From an initially contacted sample of 133 college level undergraduate students, a sample of 87 students aged 17-21 years (mean=19.6, SD=1.14) categorized into two groups as religious (n=40; males=20 & females=20) and nonreligious (n=47; males=20 & females=27) was recruited on the basis of their responses on religiosity scale. All the participants were undergraduate students and were from urban area.

Measures

Youth's Scale of Religiosity and Spirituality: It identifies whether a student is religious or non-religious through five items about belief and activities related to faith in God (Hernandez 2011). It elicits responses on 4-points' scale from 0 for never do or believe to 3 for always do or believe.

Academic Burnout: A self-report questionnaire developed by Bresoe et al. (2007) was used for estimating level of burnout among respondents. It has 15-items and assesses level of academic burnout through "emotional exhaustion" (EE 5-items), "cynicism" (CY 4-items), and "academic inefficacy" (AI 6-items). Participants used the answer choices of four-point Likert scale rated as "totally agree" (4) to "totally disagree" (1). Alpha reliability coefficients of the scale as reported by Bresoe et al. (2007) are .70 for EE, .82 for CY and .75 for AI. In the present study, internal consistencies were .81, .77, and .75 for "exhaustion, cynicism, and academic inefficacy" respectively.

Procedure

Participants (N=133) who showed their verbal consent filled-in the religiosity and spirituality scale and then were categorized into two groups of religious (n=63) and non-religious students (n=70). Through randomization, 40 students from religious group and 47 students from non-religious group were selected. Both the groups provided the baseline assessment on academic burnout scale (T1), and then RCBT was given to both groups. Religious based cognitive behavioral intervention was given weekly for a 40 minutes in face-to-face session(s) along with ten sessions for individual intervention in 10-weeks. Participants who missed sessions due to any reason were trained again. Religious and non-religious groups were assessed regarding their academic burnout after T2 and T3 at one and 12 weeks' intervals respectively when the last intervention was over.

Results

For the comparison of scores on academic burnout between religious and non-religious students across three time periods; T1, T2, and T3, analysis of variance between-within subjects was performed through SPSS-21. Data fulfilled the criteria for all assumptions to this analysis. All observations were independent and were not influenced by any other observation of group. Levene's test used for equality of variances (that should remain greater than .05) was found insignificant (Sig; T1=.407, T2=.326, & T3=.912) that showed the homogeneity of variance within the scores for each of the groups. Boxes' test of equality of covariance matrices for homogeneity of intercorrelations (that should remain greater than .001) was found .107. However the assumption sphericity was found violated because the Maluchly's Test of sphericity was found significant .000. This assumption usually expects the variance of difference in scores of population for any two conditions to be similar to the variance of the difference in scores of population for any other two conditions. It generally, is compromised in most of the cases and therefore in the present case as well; Sig. = .000).

The results for the comparison of scores on the academic burnout between religious and non-religious students across three time lines (T1, T2, and T3) showed significant findings. The key outcome for interval was found significant (Wilks' Lambda = .125, $F(2, 86) = 294.62$, $p < .001$). The Partial eta squared for main effect size was .875 that indicated a decrease in academic burnout scores across the three time points for both groups of students (Table 1). The effect of interaction between intervals and both students' groups was also found significant (Wilks' Lambda = .697, $F(2, 8) = 19.107$, $p < .001$) Partial eta squared for interaction effect size was found .313 suggesting that the change in scores on academic burnout differed over time for both groups of students. It means the change in scores across time is not same for both groups.

Table 1: Descriptive analysis of Academic Burnout for the two groups of Religious and Non-religious Students

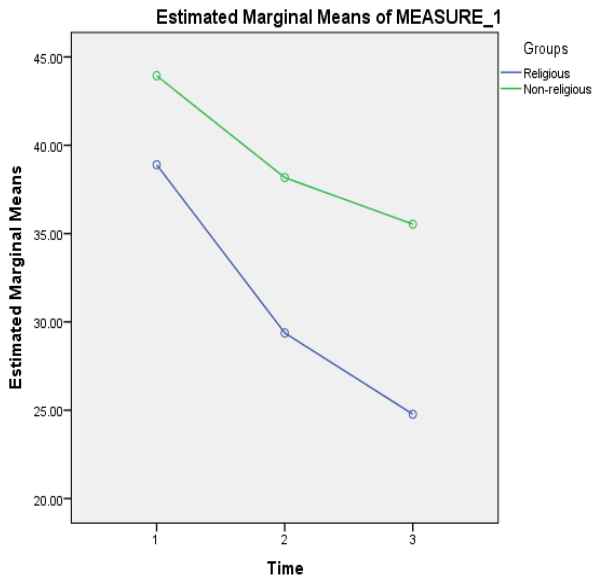
Time Period	Religious Students			Non-religious Students		
	M	SD	N	M	SD	N
Time 1 (Pretest)	38.90	2.79	40	43.94	2.87	47
Time 2 (Posttest)	29.37	2.59	40	38.17	3.27	47
Time 3 (Follow up)	24.77	3.36	40	35.53	3.18	47

The table 1 indicates means and standard deviation for the scores of academic burnout for two sampled groups of students categorized as religious and non-religious across three time periods. Findings reveal that non-religious students compared to religious students were higher on academic burnout at T1, T2 and T3.

Table 2: Between Subjects Effect for Two Groups of Religious and Non-religious Students

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Squared	Eta Squared
Intercept	319740.884	1	319740.884	22175.536	.000	.996	
Groups	4354.861	1	4354.861	302.030	.000	.780	
Error	1225.584	85	14.419				

Table-2 shows the differences in academic burnout between two groups of religious and non-religious students. Findings indicate a significant difference in scores of academic burnout between religious and non-religious groups. Partial Eta Squared = .780 demonstrate the largest effect size between both groups.



Discussion

Development of identity particularly, that of the spiritual or religious is a fundamental aspect of adolescents' lives and therefore, they seem to be more sensitive in this regard (Good and Willoughby 2008). Hence adolescents often fight with identity confusion (Steinberg 2008), and therefore may develop religious and non-religious orientations. Adolescents as students experience stress due to academic competitive environment and therefore, may adopt the religious coping strategies (Pargament et al. 2001) or even some may remain non-religious.

Hence, Koenig and Larson (2001) were of the view that medical/psychiatric training has already turned the attention towards religious factors for interventions. Alike was the assertion of Puchalski et al. (2001). Even so, Shafranske and Malony (1990) have also focused on the benefits of religious interventions in those who were participating in religious activities. However, the recommendations were too generic to address such issues with students experiencing academic burnout.

This study determined the efficacy level of RCBT in minimizing the academic burnout among students who were whether religious or not religious while coping with their stress caused by academic burnout. A 10% dropout rate was expected during the study. All students (N=87) were identified first as religious (n=40) and non-religious (n=47) and then were considered into two different groups receiving RCBT that was completed within 10 sessions; once in a week. Missing sessions were rescheduled without any delay before the next coming session for those participants who missed the original session. Religious and non-religious students completed the burnout scale at three time points; T1 for baseline assessment, T2 for after intervention assessment, and T3 for follow-up assessment.

A mixed [of] between-within subjects' analysis of variance was performed to see the level of effectiveness of RCBT for lowering the academic burnout among two groups of students; religious and non-religious. This analysis provided the two significant findings; firstly, comparison between two groups on their scores of academic burnout across three time periods (T1, T2, and T3) and secondly, comparison within the group over three time lines. Descriptive statistics for mean and standard deviations, Maluchly's Test of sphericity for variance of population scores, Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances and Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices for homogeneity of variance, Wilks' Lambda for estimation of main and interaction effects size were analyzed.

Findings of the descriptive analysis (as in Table-1) presented the significant differences in mean scores between the groups across time. Religious and non-religious students both reported the high scores on academic burnout scale at the baseline assessment, however, the non-religious students ($M=38.90$, $SD=2.79$) experienced the high burnout due to the academic stress as compared to religious students ($M=43.94$, $SD=2.87$). After receiving intervention, a significant variation was noted in scores on academic burnout between both groups. Findings indicated a larger decrease in burnout scores of religious group ($M=29.37$, $SD=2.59$) than non-religious group ($M=38.17$, $SD=3.27$). Follow-up results were also in line with the posttest results and religious students ($M=24.77$, $SD=3.36$) maintained a greater decrease in academic burnout as compared to non-religious students ($M=35.53$, $SD=3.18$).

These findings revealed that RCBT had similar outcomes for both the groups but religious students have been found more benefitted from the religious intervention. Students who acknowledged themselves as highly religious showed somewhat greater progress in their burnout scores with religious CBT as compared to their counterparts. It is consistent with that of the Golden et al. (2004) finding(s) who suggested religiosity to be effective in limiting the effects of burnout because of the reason that religion provides identity and interpersonal understanding.

Graphical representation of the results also demonstrated that both the groups have been benefitted from the Religious CBT in limiting their academic burnout. Plot lines clearly showed the impression of decreasing burnout for both groups across three time periods. However, RCBT has been found more effective for religious group. These findings could be reasoned out that RCBT worked on religious group more efficiently by changing their negative religious coping into positive one. Wilks' Lambda and partial eta squared for main effect of time has also been found significant; Wilks' Lambda = 294.62 and Partial Eta Squared = .875. These findings suggested that a largest effect existed across three time periods. Similarly the interaction effect of time and groups suggested the larger effect between both groups across three time points; Wilks' Lambda = 19.107 and Partial Eta Squared = .313.

Conclusion(s)

This study encapsulates the findings related to effectiveness of religious based intervention by providing significance of RCBT in controlling the impacts of academic burnout. Findings suggested that religious integrated CBT is effective for limiting students' burnout. However, it is more effective for students who are more religious. Religious CBT decreased the level of burnout among two groups of students over time but the effect size was larger for religious students than their counterparts.

Limitations and Suggestions

Nevertheless the authors believed that the religious intervention might be particularly effective for students facing academic burnout, the authors also have noted that their small study can't show whether religious CBT is truly equivalent effective for students' burnout. Therefore the study should be replicated with other groups of students. Moreover the current study did not examine the role of students' age and gender in efficacy of RCBT. Therefore the participants groups should be analyzed on the basis of their age and gender for religious intervention. It is also recommended that psychologists should be trained to work with students for making them capable of overcoming stress.

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