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Combating anxiety and depression among school children and adolescents through student counselling in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Background: Depression and anxiety are serious health problems that can affect a large number of children and adolescents. The literature has identified a high prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress in Saudi school children and adolescent students. Student counselling practices are effective in helping students with a wide range of social and behavioural problems. **Purpose of Study:** The aim of the research study was to conduct an evidence-based review of the literature in order to provide new and innovative approaches to developing and improving student counselling skills, methods, and frameworks in order to directly combat anxiety and depression in Saudi schools. **Sources of Evidence:** Non-empirical qualitative review of the literature on anxiety and depression and on student counselling in the United Kingdom and in Saudi Arabia. **Main Argument:** The research study argues that in theory student counsellors in Saudi schools can help to direct address and reduce the existing high prevalence of anxiety and depression in youths and adolescents attending Saudi schools. **Conclusion:** The research study concludes that student counselling in Saudi schools could potentially help in directly combating and reducing levels of anxiety and depression among Saudi school children and adolescents.

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Keywords: Student counselling; depression; anxiety; stress; children; psychotherapy; behavioural therapy; cognitive therapy; schools; Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Anxiety disorders and depression are serious health problems that can affect a large number of children and adolescents around the world. They may be particularly difficult for children and adolescents in developing

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countries such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabia) where people from poorer areas do not regularly visit the doctors. Indeed it has been generally observed that anxiety disorders and depression are commonly under-detected in healthcare settings, and that this may lead to significant problems for youths and adolescents at schools if left undetected. In developed countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), student counselling has significantly developed as a practical way to help identify and deal with the wide range of social and behavioural problems that youths and adolescents face in schools today. There are even 'best practices' for student counselling that have been developed, such as professionally qualified and experienced counsellors; accessible counselling; monitoring and evaluation procedures; responding flexibility to local diversity needs; and having professional counsellors who demonstrate personal qualities which make them suitable for counselling, e.g. good listening skills, trustworthy, approachable (Pattinson *et al.*, 2007). Consequently this research study will review the literature in order to:

- examine the nature of anxiety disorders and depression;
- highlight the prevalence of anxiety and depression in Saudi schools;
- identify the development of student counselling in the UK;
- identify student counselling practices in Saudi schools; and
- combine theory with practice in order to propose student counselling as a new way of more effectively combating the high prevalence of anxiety and depression in Saudi school youths and adolescents.

2. A brief review of the literature on anxiety and depression

Anxiety disorders and depression can regularly arise in children and adolescents, and are typically caused by a combination of biological and environmental factors. Anxiety is practically defined as "*apprehension or excessive fear about real or imagined circumstances*", with the main characteristic of anxiety being worry, or an excessive concern about situations with uncertain outcomes (Huberty 2004, p.S5-1). Anxiety may include a range of anxiety disorders such as '*separation anxiety disorder*' (SAD); '*generalized anxiety disorder*' (GAD); '*post-traumatic stress disorder*' (PTSD); '*social phobia disorder*'; and '*obsessive-compulsive disorder*' (OCD) (Huberty 2004). On the other hand depression is generally defined as "*a persistent experience of a sad or irritable mood as well as anhedonia, a loss of the ability to experience pleasure in nearly all activities*" (Cash 2004, p.1). Cash (2004) also observes that depression can include a range of symptoms such as impaired attention and concentration; changes in appetite; disrupted sleep patterns; and significantly decreased feelings of self-worth. For children and adolescents, depression which is left untreated may present serious health and other risks, as "depression can lead to school failure, conduct disorder and delinquency, anorexia and bulimia, school phobia, panic attacks, substance abuse, or even suicide" (Cash 2004, p.1).

Huberty (2004) adds that anxiety and depression can occur together about 50-60% of the time, and when they do occur together, anxiety most often comes before depression, but both increase the likelihood of suicidal thoughts. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) states that in practice, anxiety disorders can therefore prevent children from making friends, from raising a hand in class or from participating in school or social activities (ADAA, 2014b). It notes that "Research has shown that if left untreated, children with anxiety disorders are at higher risk to perform poorly in school, miss out on important social experiences, and engage in substance abuse" (ADAA 2014b, p.3). The British Columbia Medical Association (BCMA) (2010, p.6) notes that psychiatric disorders in children and youth are under-detected in healthcare settings, and that this represents "a serious omission" given that there is a lot of research which has established effective treatments for anxiety and depression in children. The BCMA (2010, p.6) therefore believes that "The debilitating nature of these disorders is routinely underestimated and the need for help may not be realized until serious impairment in social and academic functioning has occurred."

In practice children can sometimes be diagnosed with both an anxiety disorder and depression, or depression and general anxiety (ADAA, 2014a). Children may show signs of either 'major depression' (e.g. after experiencing a traumatic event such as the death of a relative or friend), or 'dysthymia', which is a less severe but chronic form of

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