



Research paper

The effects of brief individual cognitive behavioural therapy for depression and homesickness among international students in Malaysia



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ABSTRACT

Background: Students who go to other countries for higher education face various psychological problems, particularly homesickness and depression. The objectives of this study were to: (a) identify differences between students who did and did not receive brief individual cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) for depression to reduce homesickness; (b) identify whether brief individual CBT for depression reduces the level of homesickness in students between pre-, post- and follow-up assessment; and (c) compare the scores of students experiencing only homesickness and those experiencing both homesickness and depression.

Method: The sample consisted of 520 first-year undergraduate international students. The experimental group contained students who were diagnosed with depression and homesickness and received seven sessions of brief individual CBT for depression to reduce homesickness. The control group contained students who were diagnosed with depression and homesickness and received one session of advice and suggestions. The comparison group contained students who experienced only homesickness and did not receive any interventions. The study used the comparison group to determine if an interaction effect existed between students experiencing only homesickness and students experiencing both homesickness and depression.

Results: Students who received brief individual CBT displayed a significant reduction in their homesickness and depression scores compared to the scores of students in the control group. Students who experienced only homesickness exhibited a significant reduction in the scores on homesickness in the post-assessment compared to the control group's post-assessment homesickness scores.

Limitation: The results of this study cannot be generalized as data were collected from three universities in Malaysia. The follow-up assessment was conducted six months after the post-assessment, which also limits generalizability beyond six months.

Conclusion: Overall, homesickness is considered a normal reaction. Brief individual CBT for depression is effective in reducing homesickness and depression among international students.

1. Introduction

Studying in a different country can be a great opportunity for personal growth; however, it is also a major transition that may create various physical, psychological and social problems for international students (Stroebe et al., 2002; Tochkov et al., 2010). Depression and homesickness are the most common psychological problems for these students and are significantly associated with each other (Verschuur et al., 2004). Between 83% and 95% of people experience a certain level of homesickness when they are in a new environment and detached from familiar people and places (Bardelle and Lashley, 2015; Thurber et al., 1999). Some students recover from homesickness naturally within a few weeks, whereas prolonged and recurrent

homesickness is a sign of a more serious psychopathology that affects students' emotional status, academic performance and interpersonal relationships (Van Tilburg et al., 1999). Homesickness is not a pathological problem, as some students easily manage and overcome homesickness. However, Archer et al. (1998) and Bordbar et al. (2009) found that untreated and prolonged homesickness most likely increases both the intention to return home and negative feelings towards the host country. This feeling of homesickness most likely leads to adjustment disorder (Thurber et al., 2007). An adjustment disorder is characterized by the development of emotional or behavioural symptoms in response to an identifiable stressor (or stressors) occurring within 3 months of the onset of the stressor (homesickness) (Bressert, 2016). Therefore, assessing homesickness at different time points would be the best

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option for discerning if it is a pathological problem or a normal reaction in a particular case.

On the other hand, depression is a common mental disorder, characterized by sadness, loss of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, feelings of tiredness, and poor concentration (World Health Organization, 2017). Depression can negatively affect a person's motivation, affect, cognition and physiological status (McGinn, 2000). Students start experiencing homesickness before their departure for the host country, and this pre-departure homesickness is the cause of post-arrival homesickness and depression.

However, Van Tilburg et al. (1996) found that a person's mood states (including depressed mood) become worse when they experience homesickness; that homesickness manifests through depression; and that homesickness is predicted by pre-departure depressed mood (Tartakovsky, 2008). Students who experience depression concurrently experience homesickness, as the thoughts and feelings of homesickness and depression are similar and significant association exists between depression and homesickness (Pedersen et al., 2011; Verschuur et al., 2004). Van Tilburg and Vingerhoets (2005 p. 39) mention that 'most of the homesick adults are diagnosed with depressed disorder as there is no accepted criteria available for homesickness'. In addition, 'whether therapy for depression is also helpful for the homesick has not been systematically evaluated until now'.

Till now, no study has investigated whether an intervention for depression can reduce or cure homesickness. There is a need to conduct an experimental study to identify the effectiveness of psychological treatment for depression in reducing homesickness. Further research is required to identify the differences between international students with and without depression who experience homesickness.

The present study's conceptual framework is based on both previous research findings and theoretical frameworks. The contextual/environmental resource theories by Stokols et al. (1983) claimed that the relocation and various pathogenic environmental factors, such as low social support, produce homesickness and negative emotions, including sad mood, unpleasant feelings and dissatisfaction with the new place. The second theory, the person–environment congruence model (Lerner et al., 1985), states that when certain demands (e.g. interpersonal, aesthetic, professional, recreational, vocational) are not met in the new environment, it enhances feelings of separation, loss and displeasure, which lead to homesickness. Both of these theories state that homesickness is related to depression and that depression most likely leads to homesickness. Previous researcher also identified that homesickness manifests through depression and homesickness as predicted by pre-departure depressed mood (Tartakovsky, 2008). Based on these two theories and the current literature, this study anticipates that treating depression most likely reduces homesickness among international students.

Previous studies used assertive training (Bordbar et al., 2009) and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) for stress (Shahmohammadi, 2011) to reduce homesickness. Similarly, previous researchers (Beck and Alford, 2009; Gawrysiak et al., 2009) used CBT and psychoeducation (Agustin et al., 2012) to reduce depression. The present study is based on findings that depressed persons think more negatively about themselves, the world and their future, which can lead to lack of coping and adjusting to their lives (Beck and Alford, 2009; Beck et al., 1979). According to Fisher (1989), most of the behavioural, cognitive and emotional reactions of homesickness and depression are similar. Therefore, the present study used brief individual CBT techniques, such as cognitive restructuring and behavioural activation, because these may be more effective to reduce depression among a student population, as students are unlikely to come for long-term psychological treatment (Clare and Gaynor, 2008; Gabriel, 2006). It would be interesting to investigate whether modifying the negative thoughts of depression increases positive thoughts and enhances coping skills for individuals experiencing homesickness.

Most international students come to Malaysia from the Middle

Eastern, African and Asian countries. As of 31 December 2009, there were 80,000 international students registered in universities in Malaysia. The ministry of education in Malaysia predicts this number will increase to 120,000 foreign students by 2015 (The Malaysian Insider, 2010). There is a tremendous surge of international students in Malaysia, and previous studies in Malaysia have explored the existence of homesickness and depression among the international student population (Abdussalam et al., 2009; Faleel et al., 2012; Mehrnoosh and Abbas, 2010), but no studies have been conducted either in Malaysia or elsewhere regarding the effectiveness of CBT for depression in reducing homesickness among international students. Based on these findings, the present study aimed to: (a) identify differences between students who did and did not receive brief individual CBT for their depression in order to reduce homesickness; (b) identify whether brief individual CBT for depression reduces the level of homesickness in students between pre-, post- and follow-up assessment; and (c) examine differences between the scores of students who experienced only homesickness and those who experienced homesickness with depression.

Based on the above aim of this study, the hypotheses are:

- I. There will be significant differences between the homesickness scores of the three groups (experimental, control and comparison) as well as within the pre- and post-assessment scores of homesickness in each group.
- II. Students in the experimental group who showed symptoms of depression and feelings of homesickness in the pre-assessment would exhibit a significant reduction in homesickness scores on the post-assessment after receiving brief cognitive behavioural therapy for their depression.
- III. Students in the control group who showed symptoms of depression and feelings of homesickness in the pre-assessment would exhibit a significant increase in the scores of homesickness at the post-assessment without brief cognitive behavioural intervention.
- IV. Students in the comparison group who showed feelings of homesickness in the pre-assessment would exhibit significant differences in homesickness scores at the post-assessment.
- V. There would be significant differences among the three groups' (experimental, control and comparison) scores of homesickness in the post-assessment.
- VI. Students who exhibited a significant reduction in homesickness scores at the post- assessment after receiving brief cognitive behavioural therapy for their depression would tend to show a further reduction in homesickness scores in the follow-up assessment.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

In this experimental study, the convenient sampling method was used to collect data from 532 first semester undergraduate international students studying in universities in Malaysia. Out of 532 international students, only 520 were selected as participants, because the remaining 12 participants' responses in the questionnaires were incomplete. Out of 520 participants, 372 participants were males and 148 were females. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 23 years old and the mean age was 20.38 years. The number of participants of various nationalities included 60 Nigerians, 12 Ethiopians, 42 Zimbabweans, 20 Sudanese, 105 Iranians, 111 Iraqis, 37 Lebanese, 31 Saudi Arabians, 26 Yemenis, 14 Sri Lankans, 13 Pakistanis, 11 Jordanians, 9 Egyptians and 9 Bangladeshis.

The international students who exhibited both homesickness in the Dundee Relocation Inventory (DRI) and mild to moderate level of depression in Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) scale, and who fulfil the DSM-IV-TR criteria for minor depressive disorder, were included in the experimental and control groups. Concurrently, international students who exhibited only homesickness were included in the comparison

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