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Effectiveness of Narrative Therapy in Reducing Anxiety and Depression
among Middle School Students in Refugee Camps in Northern Palestine:
A Quasi-Experimental Study

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STUDY LOCATION:

UNRWA-operated middle schools in Jenin, Balata, and Askar Refugee Camps,
Northern Palestine

Manualized Narrative Therapy Protocol

Culturally Adapted School-Based Narrative Therapy Program for Palestinian Refugee Adolescents

Program Overview

This manual describes a culturally adapted narrative therapy program developed for Palestinian refugee adolescents experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression. The intervention is grounded in the principles of narrative therapy and integrates culturally meaningful concepts, including *sumud* (steadfastness), collective resilience, Palestinian storytelling traditions, and olive tree symbolism. The program was designed for implementation in UNRWA-operated middle schools and delivered by trained school counselors and psychologists.

The intervention consists of ten weekly group sessions of approximately 60 minutes each. Groups comprise approximately ten adolescents aged 12–15 years (Grades 6–9). Sessions progressively guide participants from establishing psychological safety and therapeutic rapport toward problem externalization, restoration of personal agency, strengthening of individual and collective resilience, mindfulness practice, and future-oriented narrative reconstruction. Throughout the intervention, facilitators emphasize voluntary participation, cultural sensitivity, confidentiality, and trauma-informed care.

Session 1. Introduction and Safety Building

The first session focuses on establishing a psychologically safe and supportive therapeutic environment. Facilitators introduce themselves and explain the aims of the program while emphasizing confidentiality, mutual respect, and voluntary participation. Participants engage in a structured icebreaker activity by sharing the story behind their names, encouraging early group cohesion and interpersonal trust.

Following introductions, the group collaboratively develops shared guidelines that promote respectful communication, active listening, confidentiality, and acceptance of diverse perspectives. Facilitators then introduce storytelling as a culturally meaningful method for understanding personal experiences and emotional wellbeing. Discussion centers on traditional Palestinian storytelling practices and the symbolic significance of the olive tree as a representation of endurance, identity, and resilience. The session concludes with a brief emotional check-in and reflection on participants' expectations for the program.

Session 2. Building Trust and Cultural Resilience

The second session strengthens therapeutic alliance while introducing the concept of *sumud* as a culturally grounded framework for resilience. Facilitators begin with a brief review of the previous session followed by a simple breathing exercise to promote relaxation and emotional regulation.

Participants complete the "Olive Tree Exercise," during which they identify the personal, familial, social, and cultural resources that help individuals withstand adversity. The roots, trunk, and branches of the olive tree are used metaphorically to represent sources of strength, personal qualities, and aspirations for future growth. Facilitators then present a traditional Palestinian story illustrating perseverance during hardship and guide a reflective discussion exploring resilience, coping, and collective identity. The session concludes with participant reflections, emotional check-in, and a brief guided visualization of a strong olive tree as a symbol of stability and hope.

Session 3. Externalizing Anxiety

This session introduces the narrative therapy technique of problem externalization, enabling participants to separate their identity from anxiety-related difficulties. Facilitators begin with a review of previous content and a brief grounding exercise focused on present-moment awareness.

The concept of externalization is introduced through culturally relevant metaphors, particularly the "shadow" metaphor, where anxiety is conceptualized as a shadow that follows the individual rather than constituting their core identity. Participants are guided to describe their anxiety metaphorically—considering its size, shape, color, and behavior. Through drawing and descriptive writing, they name their anxiety (e.g., "The Heavy Shadow," "The Stone of Worry"), thereby creating psychological distance from the problem.

Facilitators then explore how the "shadow" affects daily functioning, relationships, and self-perception. Discussion emphasizes that while the shadow is real and challenging, it does not define the person. The session concludes with a summary of externalization principles, emotional check-in, and preview of the following session.

Session 4. Externalizing Depression

Building upon the externalization framework established in Session 3, this session applies similar principles to depressive experiences. Facilitators introduce the "cloud" or "heavy blanket" metaphor to help participants conceptualize depression as a temporary condition external to their essential self.

Participants are guided to describe their depression metaphorically, exploring its characteristics, intensity, and patterns of presence. They name their depression (e.g., "The Dark Cloud," "The Heavy Blanket") and examine how it influences thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Facilitators then introduce the concept of "unique outcomes" or exceptions—identifying times when the cloud is smaller or absent and exploring what contributed to those moments.

Discussion focuses on distinguishing between the depressive narrative and the person's authentic identity, emphasizing that depression is an experience rather than a defining characteristic. The session concludes with identification of coping strategies that have been effective in reducing depressive symptoms and a brief emotional check-in.

Session 5. Agency Restoration: Identifying Strengths

This session shifts focus from problem-saturated narratives toward identification of personal strengths, resources, and resilience. Facilitators begin by reviewing the previous sessions' externalization work and introducing Palestinian proverbs that emphasize patience, community, and perseverance.

Participants complete a "Tree of Strengths" activity, building upon the olive tree imagery introduced earlier. The roots represent sources of support (family, friends, faith, community); the trunk represents personal strengths (patience, courage, kindness, humor); the branches represent aspirations for growth (hope, confidence, peace); and the leaves represent achievements, both large and small.

Through guided reflection, participants identify strengths they may not have previously recognized. Group discussion highlights common strengths and shared experiences of resilience. Facilitators help participants connect individual strengths to cultural values and community resources. The session concludes with sharing and affirmation, emotional check-in, and preview of the next session.

Session 6. Agency Restoration: Resilience Stories

This session deepens participants' engagement with narratives of personal and collective resilience. Facilitators share culturally resonant stories of Palestinian resilience, emphasizing themes of perseverance, community solidarity, and hope despite adversity.

Participants are guided to reflect on their own experiences of resilience—times when they faced difficulty and persevered. Using writing or drawing, they construct personal resilience narratives addressing what happened, what was difficult, how they coped, who helped them, and what they learned. These narratives are positioned as evidence of existing strength and capacity.

Participants are invited to share their resilience stories within the group, receiving affirmation and recognition from peers and facilitators. The session emphasizes that everyone possesses a story of strength, and that these stories provide a foundation for future resilience. The session concludes with summary reflections and emotional check-in.

Session 7. Collective Resilience: Community Narratives

This session broadens the focus from individual to collective resilience, recognizing that Palestinian refugee adolescents experience hardship within familial and community contexts. Facilitators introduce the concept of the olive grove as a metaphor for community—many trees standing together, their roots interconnected, providing mutual support and protection.

Participants collaboratively construct a "Community Tree," representing their collective resources, strengths, hopes, and individual contributions. The roots represent community supports (faith, family, traditions, land); the trunk represents collective strength (*sumud*, generosity, hospitality); the branches represent community aspirations; and individual leaves represent each participant's contribution to community wellbeing.

Discussion explores how community membership provides strength during difficult times, how collective resilience operates in Palestinian refugee camps, and how participants can contribute to community wellbeing. The session concludes with a group affirmation emphasizing unity and collective strength.

Session 8. Collective Resilience: Rebuilding Narratives

This session explores narratives of rebuilding and hope following adversity. Facilitators introduce examples of community rebuilding within Palestinian refugee camps, emphasizing themes of determination, cooperation, hope, and faith.

Participants reflect on their own contributions to community resilience, identifying what they can offer, how they can support others, and what they wish to build. Through guided discussion, they connect individual hopes to collective aspirations, recognizing that each person plays a role in community recovery and growth.

The session emphasizes that rebuilding is an ongoing process requiring patience, persistence, and collective effort. Participants are encouraged to envision their role in shaping their community's future. The session concludes with a summary, emotional check-in, and preview of the final sessions.

Session 9. Integration and Mindfulness

This session introduces mindfulness techniques for grounding and emotional regulation while integrating skills developed throughout the program. Facilitators begin by reviewing key concepts from previous sessions: externalization (shadow, stone, cloud), personal strengths (tree of strengths), resilience narratives, and collective resilience (community tree).

Participants engage in a guided mindfulness exercise, walking through an imaginary olive grove. The visualization emphasizes sensory experience (sun, breeze, birdsong), connection to the olive tree's strength and stability, and awareness of being grounded and supported. Participants are guided to feel the tree's resilience—its ability to bend without breaking, its deep roots, and its connection to generations past and future.

Following the visualization, participants reflect in their notebooks on what they have learned about themselves, how they understand their difficulties differently, what strengths they have identified, and what hopes they hold for the future. The session concludes with optional sharing and emotional check-in.

Session 10. Integration and Future Planning

The final session consolidates learning, celebrates growth, and develops a plan for continued application of skills. Facilitators review the program's key themes and activities, guiding participants to reflect on their favorite sessions and most meaningful insights.

Participants construct a "Future Tree," identifying roots that will support continued growth (support systems, coping strategies), trunk representing strengths they will carry forward, branches representing future goals, and leaves representing tools and skills learned. This activity emphasizes that while the group is ending, the participants' journey of growth and resilience continues.

The session includes discussion of how participants will apply their learning outside the group setting and what resources are available for ongoing support. Facilitators provide affirmation and validation of participants' growth, distributing certificates of completion. The session concludes with a group affirmation celebrating collective strength and continued resilience.

Facilitator Guidelines

Main Cultural Concepts:

Sumud (steadfastness) represents Palestinian cultural resilience, determination, and refusal to surrender despite adversity. It is understood as active resistance and preservation of identity rather than passive endurance. The olive tree symbolizes Palestinian identity, connection to land, resilience, and longevity, able to survive harsh conditions for centuries. Palestinian culture emphasizes collective identity and community support, with individual healing understood in relation to family and community wellbeing.

Trauma-Informed Principles:

Facilitators ensure physical and emotional safety in all sessions, maintain transparency and honesty about program procedures, facilitate supportive peer relationships, empower participants through choice and shared decision-making, focus on strengths and resilience, and integrate cultural practices and values throughout the program.

Managing Distress:

When participants become distressed, facilitators pause the activity, provide grounding techniques (breath awareness, sensory focus), offer individual support as needed, follow established referral protocols, and document concerns. Referral pathways include UNRWA counselors, school psychologists, and partner mental health clinics in the refugee camps.

Fidelity Monitoring

Implementation fidelity is assessed through independent rating of 30% of recorded sessions by two trained raters. Facilitators complete checklists after each session documenting completion of core components. Weekly supervision meetings address implementation challenges and ensure adherence to the manual. Inter-rater reliability is calculated to ensure consistent fidelity assessment.