Exploratory Practice of Online Group Psychological Counseling with Narrative Painting Therapy

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Abstract: To explore effective paths for improving college students' mental health, this study integrates narrative therapy and painting therapy to design a 7-week online group psychological counseling program. A total of 121 volunteer college students participated as subjects, and themed painting counseling was conducted via Tencent Meeting. Five scales, including the General Self-Efficacy Scale, Self-Esteem Scale, and Self-Rating Depression Scale, were used for pretest and post-test comparisons. The results show that after the intervention, students' self-efficacy ($t = -5.528$, $p = 0.000$) and self-esteem level ($t = -2.153$, $p = 0.033$) significantly improved statistically, and depression and anxiety showed a positive improvement trend. The research indicates that online narrative painting therapy can effectively release students' psychological pressure, promote in-depth self-cognition and interpersonal connection construction, providing an operable innovative paradigm for college mental health education. Its interactivity and effectiveness are compatible with the psychological needs and internet usage habits of contemporary college students.

Keywords: Mental health education; Narrative painting therapy; Online group counseling

1. Introduction

College students are facing increasing mental health challenges influenced by academic pressures, social dynamics, and personal development stressors. Traditional mental health education methods often lack interactivity and deep emotional engagement, making it necessary to explore innovative and adaptable approaches. Narrative therapy and painting therapy have individually demonstrated effectiveness in fostering self-expression and emotional processing. By integrating these two modalities within an online group format, this study aims to develop and test a structured intervention that aligns with contemporary students' digital habits and psychological needs. This paper explores the design, implementation, and outcomes of a 7-week online group narrative painting therapy program, assessing its potential as a scalable and engaging model for enhancing college students' mental well-being.

2. Theoretical basis of online group psychological counseling with narrative painting therapy

2.1. Narrative therapy

Narrative therapy is centered on the core proposition that "people are not the problem; the problem is the problem", emphasizing the value of constructing and reconstructing individuals' life stories. In the process of narrative therapy, psychological teachers engage with students with sincerity, respect, and acceptance, making students feel safe and trusted. They guide students to view problems as external objects that can be challenged and changed, thereby reducing self-blame and negative evaluations. Teachers also review students' life experiences together to find unique outcomes different from problem narratives. Based on these unique outcomes, they further explore students' alternative stories, positive and powerful story fragments obscured by problem narratives. Using positive elements in alternative stories, teachers and students reconstruct a more positive and empowering life story together. By inviting students' family members, friends, or peers as witnesses to share the new story, the effectiveness of changes is consolidated through the feedback and support of witnesses, enhancing the credibility and influence of the new story. At the same time, students are encouraged to extend the core beliefs of the new story to more areas such as study, life, and interpersonal communication to expand growth possibilities. By recording positive behaviors and qualities daily, positive self-cognition is continuously strengthened, achieving long-term improvement of psychological status.

2.2. Painting therapy

As an important branch of expressive arts therapy, painting therapy takes non-verbal communication as its core advantage, providing a safe carrier for the externalization of individuals' inner worlds. Through painting, people can project subconscious emotions and conflicts onto the canvas, deepening their understanding of the inner world. The relaxation and stress reduction effects of the painting process itself are the core manifestations of narrative painting therapy in externalizing subconscious emotions and achieving psychological regulation through artistic forms [1]. When painting, people can focus on the current creation, forgetting external pressures and troubles. By observing their own paintings, people can discover their strengths and weaknesses, thereby better understanding themselves and improving self-cognition. Through observing and interpreting their own paintings, individuals can more intuitively identify their dominant traits and potential confusions, completing the iterative upgrade of self-cognition through self-examination. This kind of self-exploration through artistic creation is highly consistent with the core orientation of mental health education under the perspective of positive psychology, which focuses on cultivating students' positive psychological qualities [2].

3. Research process of online group psychological counseling with narrative painting therapy

The subjects were 2023-level college students who voluntarily signed up for the online group psychological counseling with narrative painting therapy. A total of 125 students participated, and 121 students persisted in 7 online group painting counseling sessions and completed both pre-test and post-test, including 43 males and 78 females.

3.1. Psychological scales used

(1) General self-efficacy scale

(2) Interpersonal trust scale (ITS)

(3) Self-esteem scale

(4) Self-rating depression scale (SDS)

(5) Self-rating anxiety scale (SAS)

3.2. Specific methods of online group narrative painting psychological counseling

This study adopted an intervention method of online group painting psychological counseling based on narrative concepts. The teaching process integrated online interaction and was conducted in Tencent Meeting [3]. Each planned teaching theme was presented through painting, and the form of "creative practice + sharing and interaction" was adopted to encourage everyone to take photos of their paintings and share them in the chat area for communication [4]. The program design followed the modular teaching logic of "theory + practice", constructing a 7-session progressive painting theme counseling system [5]. Through a closed-loop design of "theme theory guidance + creative practice experience + peer sharing and feedback", the in-depth integration of psychological knowledge transmission and practical experience internalization was achieved. The teaching implementation lasted for 7 weeks, once a week, with each counseling session lasting about 60 minutes. The specific counseling content consisted of 7 group painting psychological guidance sessions (see **Table 1** below).

Table 1. Group training program of group painting psychological counseling based on narrative concepts

Session	Teaching objectives	Theme content of group painting psychological counseling
1st	Team ice-breaking, voluntary sharing, increasing participation interest	My Psychological Self-Portrait—" People Like Me"
2nd	Releasing emotions and pressure, encouraging self-expression	My Emotional Little Monster—Colorful Emotional Garden
3rd	Delving into inner experiences, sorting out life experiences	My Growth Story—Sharing Important Events in Life Journey
4th	Materializing troubles, relieving pressure through confession	My Troubles and Problems—Untying Knots Through Painting
5th	Feeling interpersonal connection, increasing positive emotional experiences	My Interpersonal Support System—Sharing Touching Moments in Life (Choosing among family love, friendship, or love)
6th	Exploring positive resources, enhancing self-esteem	My Hobbies—Sharing Interesting Souls
7th	Stimulating hope traits, improving self-efficacy	"I Aspire, I Strive, I Set Out"—The Poetry and Distance I Yearn For

3.3. Research results

The research results show that narrative painting therapy can effectively improve college students' self-efficacy and self-esteem, indicating that group narrative painting psychological counseling can enhance participants' self-confidence. At the same time, narrative expression can "externalize" and deconstruct life events, which is conducive to increasing college students' positive cognitive evaluations of themselves and improving their mental health.

Table 2. Scores and difference test of psychological dimensions of college students before and after narrative painting therapy

Psychological dimension	Pre-test	Post-test	Difference	t	p
General self-efficacy	2.88 ± 0.458	3.08 ± 0.475	-0.20 ± 0.3963	-5.528	0.000
Self-esteem	28.90 ± 5.165	29.81 ± 5.153	-0.909 ± 4.644	-2.153	0.033
Depression	58.57 ± 5.031	57.59 ± 5.757	0.983 ± 5.655	-1.913	0.058
Anxiety	49.28 ± 11.665	48.26 ± 11.034	1.025 ± 11.682	-0.965	0.337
Interpersonal trust	68.44 ± 6.506	68.97 ± 6.747	-0.529 ± 7.018	0.829	0.409

4. Application value of online group psychological counseling with narrative painting therapy

Through the organic combination of online narrative and painting, group psychological counseling highlights creative and introspective characteristics, helping individuals adjust emotions and ideas, deepen their understanding of self and real relationships, and promote comprehensive self-understanding and growth. In painting creation, student-centered and problem-solving oriented, students can release their inner creative potential, intuitively feel their own strength, and then promote self-acceptance and self-confidence improvement [6].

The ambiguity, flexibility, and irrational characteristics of narrative painting language provide students with a safe channel for emotional expression, enabling them to naturally reveal their inner feelings and emotions, and avoid interpersonal troubles that may be caused by direct expression, achieving gentle and effective emotional catharsis. At the same time, the focus on creation during painting allows college students to temporarily detach from stressors and achieve physical and mental relaxation. This experiential teaching form effectively makes up for the problems of single methods and insufficient student participation in traditional mental health courses [7]. In addition, in the group counseling scenario, by sharing their works and creative processes and listening to others' stories and insights, students not only deepen their self-cognition but also improve their interpersonal communication skills through interaction [8].

5. Developing new methods and prospects for psychological counseling in the new era

5.1. Expanding psychological service forms through network channels

Contemporary college students are increasingly integrated with the internet psychologically. It is imperative to extend the online space of mental health education courses according to college students' psychological service needs and improve the efficiency of psychological counseling [9]. Narrative painting psychological therapy can be organically combined online and offline. It can also be recruited through online networks, combined with classical poetry, mindfulness painting, mindfulness writing, and mindfulness reading to enhance psychological therapy effects, further strengthening the shaping of college students' positive psychological qualities.

5.2. Building a protective barrier for counseling

Psychological teachers can fully tap into online platforms to maintain constant communication with students with psychological distress, timely understand and track their psychological dynamics, including paying attention to their Moments, Douyin, Xiaohongshu, Weibo, etc., which can quickly resolve potential or emerging psychological

crisis risks [10]. Establish QQ groups for psychological counseling, open psychological counseling hotlines, issue special email addresses for psychological counseling, provide 24-hour professional services, answer calls immediately, offer full support, carefully address questions, and show sincere care [11].

5.3. Taking multiple measures to precisely carry out mental health education

During college students' enrollment, in addition to maintaining regular counseling during working hours from Monday to Friday, the school announces psychological counseling hotlines for non-working hours (including weekends and holidays) to provide students with convenient and timely psychological counseling, ensuring that students can receive accessible psychological care. Focusing on common psychological conflict points in college life such as interpersonal relationships and academic pressure, in addition to small-scale offline group psychological counseling, online group psychological counseling activities can be launched in a timely manner [12]. Build a crisis prevention and intervention network. Regularly summarize prominent problems in psychological counseling and crisis intervention, identify commonalities, effectively prevent and solve practical problems, and promptly send risk prompts to various departments through peer supervisors to resolve potential risks; take the initiative to connect with colleges, care for special groups, promptly identify high-risk groups, and conduct targeted psychological counseling and crisis intervention to avoid extreme events.

6. Conclusion

This study integrates post-modern "narrative therapy concepts" and "painting art therapy". Through painting creation guided by narrative concepts, it effectively improves the participation of college students in online psychological classes, allowing students to release pressure through confession and perceive themselves in creation. This model successfully achieves the organic integration of mental health education and value guidance, practicing the educational concept of "explicit psychological counseling + implicit ideological and political education" [13]. Under the positive guidance and resource exploration of teachers, students' in-depth experiences and exchanges are fully stimulated, promoting the transformation of curriculum goals from external requirements to internal motivation for students' self-growth. This process fully demonstrates the core value of "student-centered and cultivating autonomous learning habits" [14]. The teaching program for improving college students' mental health developed in this study provides rich practical cases and feasible ideas, which is of great practical significance for college students' psychological crisis prevention. It also provides strong practical support for the in-depth application of the "student-centered and problem-solving oriented" educational model in the field of mental health [15].

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Disclosure statement

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