

Original Article

The effectiveness of existential group therapy on empathy, communication skills, and rumination in long bereavement patients

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Abstract

Individuals experiencing prolonged grief often face issues such as a lack of empathy for others, decreased interpersonal communication, and increased rumination. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of existential group therapy on empathy, communication skills, and rumination in long bereavement patients. The research utilized a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up, including a control group. The population consisted of all patients suffering from prolonged grief in the city of Boukan in 2022. Participants were selected through convenience sampling and placed into a single group. Initially, questionnaires assessing empathy, communication skills, and rumination were distributed among the group (pre-test). Subsequently, the group underwent existential group therapy interventions, meeting once a week for 2 hours over 8 weeks. After the sessions, a post-test was administered to the group, followed by a follow-up three months later. Data was analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA. The results indicated significant differences between the control and experimental groups in the post-test scores related to empathy, communication skills, and rumination ($p < 0.05$). Thus, the intervention of existential group therapy was found to be effective in improving empathy, and communication skills, and reducing rumination in individuals experiencing prolonged grief.

Keywords

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Introduction

The experience of losing a loved one can manifest as profound and enduring grief, leading to significant emotional distress that affects individuals' mental, emotional, cognitive, and physical health. Prolonged grief disorder has recently been recognized as a diagnostic category in both the American Statistical Manual and the International Classification of Diseases (Lenferink et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic has been associated with increased levels of prolonged grief disorder and other negative grief-related outcomes (Selman et al., 2022). The duration of mourning can vary depending on individual and cultural factors (Cohen et al., 2023).

The term "prolonged grief" refers to an extended period of mourning and coping with loss. This process is often complex and can affect mental and physical health (Hilberdink et al., 2023). Prolonged grief can be accompanied by mental and physical health issues and difficulties in daily life (Hurmuz et al., 2023; Taravian et al., 2025). Research shows that while grieving individuals

may feel empathy toward the deceased for an extended period, they may struggle to regulate their empathy toward surviving family members and others after the loss (Yoshiike et al., 2023). These findings highlight the role of empathy in the grieving process and suggest that grief may not be a uniform experience for all individuals. Empathy is typically defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, encompassing both cognitive and emotional components (Drigas & Papoutsis, 2023; Murphy et al., 2022). This ability to adopt another's perspective and consider alternative viewpoints is deemed essential in human social interactions (Li et al., 2023; Little et al., 2023). Empathy is also associated with both prosocial and antisocial behaviors, and its impact extends to areas such as psychological harm, attentional bias, and emotional exhaustion (Chang-Arana et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2023). The shared understanding and empathetic engagement can alleviate feelings of isolation often experienced during bereavement (Griffin et al., 2022; Van Baarsen, 2002). The development of empathy is influenced by factors such as interpersonal communication (Zheng et al., 2022) and also affects

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interpersonal relationships, as a lack of empathy can exacerbate conflicts and potentially increase the risk of intimate partner violence (Brassard et al., 2022). Studies have highlighted the challenges associated with grief (Li et al., 2024).

One of these challenges is the diminishing of interpersonal connections, which underscores the importance of communication skills. Communication skills involve the ability to effectively transmit and receive information and are crucial for problem-solving and facilitating relationships (Harrop et al., 2023). Communication skills are considered a fundamental component of life skills, defined as the ability to establish effective and beneficial relationships with others, leading to the creation of responses (Hanetz-Gamliel, 2024). This includes the ability to communicate effectively at the interpersonal level (Yoel et al., 2023). It has been shown that the ability to communicate effectively at an interpersonal level significantly impacts various aspects of professional and personal life (Alimohammadi Maki & Mansouri, 2023).

One of the symptoms observed in individuals with prolonged grief is rumination (Thimm et al., 2024). Rumination is a cognitive response characterized by repetitive and intrusive thoughts about distressing events and their consequences, often accompanied by negative thinking. It can reflect an individual's mental well-being and psychological functioning (Guc et al., 2024; Thimm et al., 2024). Rumination can be categorized into different subtypes, such as action-focused and state-focused rumination, each associated with varying negative outcomes (Choi & Miyamoto, 2023). Grief-related rumination significantly predicts the severity of prolonged grief disorder symptoms among bereaved individuals (Thimm et al., 2024). Individuals who engage in maladaptive rumination are more likely to experience intensified grief reactions (Sveen et al., 2019). Additionally, rumination is linked to mental health disorders and can serve as an indicator of their presence or as a predictor of their development (Li et al., 2024).

Addressing interconnected challenges in grief requires an approach that not only facilitates emotional processing but also fosters self-awareness, meaning-making, and the development of healthy coping mechanisms (Saciloti & Bombarda, 2022). Existential therapy seems to be one of the appropriate treatments for individuals experiencing grief (Zhou et al., 2023). Existential therapy is a widely recognized approach that addresses fundamental human concerns such as meaninglessness, freedom, and death, regardless of cultural or religious background (Ziaei et al., 2022). Existential therapy involves addressing spiritual and religious aspects, such as finding meaning and purpose in life, which are essential for psychological well-being (Liu et al., 2023).

Moreover, existential therapy has been recommended for addressing existential distress and meaning-making (Carr et al., 2023). No study has been found that examines the effectiveness of existential therapy on empathy.

Existential group therapy has been proposed as a potential intervention for addressing these challenges, as

it focuses on helping individuals explore their existence, find meaning, and develop coping strategies in the face of loss. Despite the growing body of research on grief, empathy, communication skills, and rumination, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the effectiveness of existential group therapy in addressing these interconnected issues specifically in individuals experiencing prolonged grief. While studies have examined the impact of existential therapy on empathy (Hvidt et al., 2020), communication patterns (Amani, 2017) and rumination in various contexts (Rezapour-Mirsaleh et al., 2023; Sodani et al., 2019), no study has comprehensively investigated its effects on empathy, communication skills, and rumination in the context of prolonged grief. This research gap presents an opportunity for innovation in the field of grief therapy. By exploring the effectiveness of existential group therapy on these specific outcomes in individuals with prolonged grief, this study aims to contribute valuable insights to the existing literature and potentially inform more targeted therapeutic interventions. The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of existential group therapy on empathy, communication skills, and rumination.

Method

Participants

In the present study, the research method was a quasi-experimental type, and the research design was of a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up type with a control group. The population of the study included clients with prolonged grief disorder at the psychological services center in Boukan City in 2022, West Azerbaijan Province. Sampling was done through convenient and voluntary methods, meaning that among the clients who visited the psychological services center in Boukan in 2022 and were diagnosed with prolonged grief disorder, 30 individuals were voluntarily selected after reviewing the inclusion and exclusion criteria. They were randomly assigned to two groups: experimental and control (15 people in each group). The sample size was selected based on the average sample size of previous similar studies, and pre-test and post-test assessments were conducted on the participants.

Instrument

Baron-Cohen Empathy Quotient Scale:

This scale, developed by Baron-Cohen in 2004, consists of 40 items that cover three subscales: emotional empathy, cognitive empathy, and social skills, along with a total score. Respondents answer these items on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Scores range from 0 (for low empathy) to 80 (for high empathy). The reliability of this test has been reported as 0.97, and its Cronbach's alpha is 0.92. In Iran, Cronbach's alpha coefficient has been reported to range from 0.83 to 0.90, and the test-retest reliability over four weeks is reported at 0.80,

indicating adequate validity and reliability (Zalpour, 2015).

Queendoms Communication Skills Questionnaire:

This questionnaire, developed to assess the communication skills of adults, contains 34 items. The communication skills measured by this scale include five subskills: listening, the ability to receive and send messages, insight into the communication process, emotional control, and assertiveness. The questionnaire is based on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "never" = 1 to "always" = 5. The maximum possible score is 170, and the minimum is 34. In Iran, the overall reliability was assessed as 0.88, and the test-retest reliability was 0.71 (Fazeli, 2021).

Ruminative Responses Scale:

This questionnaire, designed by Nolen-Hoeksema and Morrow (1991), aims to measure individuals' tendency to engage in negative ruminative responses. The scale reflects how much individuals engage in rumination when experiencing emotional disturbances. It consists of 11 questions, and each question is scored on a four-point Likert scale from "never" = 0 to "almost always" = 4. The final score is calculated by summing all the questions. Test-retest reliability and internal consistency methods were used to assess the reliability of the Ruminative Response Scale, while construct validity and factor analysis were used to assess its validity. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this scale has been reported at 0.90, and the test-retest reliability is reported at 0.68. In Iran, Cronbach's alpha as a measure of internal consistency has been reported at 0.88 (Askari & Zandkarimi, 2022).

Existential Group Therapy:

Existential analysis-based group therapy was conducted over 8 weekly sessions, each lasting 2 hours, according to the protocol of (Zadafshar et al., 2022).

Procedure

Initially, the pre-test was conducted by giving the experimental group the relevant questionnaires for the dependent variables. Then, the existential group therapy intervention was carried out in 8 sessions for the experimental group. Inclusion criteria was included: diagnosis of prolonged grief disorder based on the criteria outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), age between 18 and 65 years, willingness to participate in the study. Exclusion criteria was included: current diagnosis of a severe mental illness (e.g., psychosis, bipolar disorder), urrent involvement in other forms of psychotherapy, absence from more than two group therapy sessions. In the end, the same research questionnaires were given to both groups as the post-test, and all pre-test and post-test questionnaires were analyzed. Additionally, a follow-up was conducted three months later. To analyze the data, repeated measures ANOVA was used to assess changes over time. This statistical method allowed for the examination of the effectiveness of the existential group therapy on empathy, communication skills, and rumination across the different time points (pre-test, post-test, and follow-up).

In conducting this research, ethical considerations were paramount. All participants provided informed consent in writing before participating in the study. The privacy and confidentiality of all personal information and data of the participants were protected, and anonymization techniques were used in the management and storage of data. There was random assignment to experimental and control groups. Given the sensitive nature of the topic (grief), measures were taken to support participants who might experience emotional distress during the study, with access to counseling services or referrals available if needed. After the study, the control group was offered the intervention.

Table 1. Existential group therapy intervention

| session | content |
|-----------------|--|
| First session | Explaining the formation of problems based on the existential approach, explaining group therapy and existential analysis, introducing group rules and norms, introducing members, examining the concerns and opinions of members regarding the issues raised. |
| Second session | Encouraging members to express feelings and thoughts, teaching members about empathy and giving feedback, focusing on the here and now |
| Third session | Increasing awareness by focusing on three types of ways of being, existential analysis, openness and self-expression, encouraging members to express reactions to others. |
| Fourth session | Existential analysis of the concepts of freedom and choice, explaining the relationship between freedom and choice in human relationships, encouraging members to make new decisions |
| Fifth session | Existential analysis of the concepts of freedom and choice, explaining the relationship between freedom and choice in human relationships, encouraging members to discuss new decisions and accept responsibility and choice. |
| Sixth session | Encouraging members to give feedback on each other's experiences of deep relationships with others, existential analysis of death as a complement to life, discussion of members' attitudes and re-feelings of death. |
| Seventh session | Existential analysis of purposefulness and meaning-seeking in life, members' conversations about past goals and finding hidden meanings |
| Eighth session | Overview, explanation of future challenges for members |

Results

Demographic findings showed that out of the sample members, 11 respondents (36.66%) were male and 19 respondents (63.33%) were female. The average age of the experimental group was 38.3 years, while the

average age of the control group was 38.6 years. Descriptive statistics for the dependent variables studied in both the experimental and control groups at pre-test, post-test, and follow-up stages are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation of Research Variables

| Variable | exams | Group | N | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|----------------------|-----------|--------------|----|--------|--------------------|
| Empathy | Pre-test | Experimental | 15 | 47/00 | 3/18 |
| | | Control | 15 | 48/40 | 3/75 |
| | Post-test | Experimental | 15 | 55/13 | 5/04 |
| | | Control | 15 | 49/20 | 4/24 |
| | Follow-up | Experimental | 15 | 55/06 | 5/20 |
| | | Control | 15 | 48/73 | 3/47 |
| Communication Skills | Pre-test | Experimental | 15 | 102/80 | 15/13 |
| | | Control | 15 | 103/66 | 15/06 |
| | Post-test | Experimental | 15 | 115/80 | 18/55 |
| | | Control | 15 | 104/00 | 16/15 |
| | Follow-up | Experimental | 15 | 116/13 | 18/33 |
| | | Control | 15 | 104/40 | 16/22 |
| Rumination | Pre-test | Experimental | 15 | 34/06 | 3/21 |
| | | Control | 15 | 35/86 | 4/42 |
| | Post-test | Experimental | 15 | 23/26 | 5/11 |
| | | Control | 15 | 36/13 | 4/40 |
| | Follow-up | Experimental | 15 | 22/53 | 5/46 |
| | | Control | 15 | 29/00 | 4/80 |

According to Table 2, it is observed that the total scores of empathy and communication skills in participants attending Vojdani group therapy sessions increased, while rumination decreased, and this effect persisted during the follow-up period. However, in the control group participants, no significant change was observed in the mean scores of these variables at different stages of measurement (from pre-test to post-test and follow-up). In this study, before performing an analysis of variance, the Shapiro-Wilk test and the skewness and kurtosis indices were used to assess the assumption of normal distribution of scores in the population. The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test show that for all dependent variables, the significance level is greater than 0.05 ($P > 0.05$), indicating that the distribution of scores in the population is normal. Additionally, the skewness and kurtosis values of the research variables fall within the range of (-2 to 2), which indicates that the distribution of the variables exhibits normal skewness

and kurtosis. Therefore, the use of analysis of variance in the research data is permissible. Furthermore, Levene's assumption was confirmed for all dependent variables in the study. The homogeneity of the covariance matrix was examined using the M-Box test, and the results confirmed this assumption for empathy (Box's $M = 11.35$, $F = 12.918$, $p = 0.077$), communication skills (Box's $M = 22.44$, $F = 3.009$, $p = 0.302$), and rumination (Box's $M = 12.04$, $F = 1.772$, $p = 0.101$). Mauchly's sphericity test showed that the significance level for the scores of each of the dependent variables was 0.001, thus rejecting the assumption of sphericity. As a result, the assumption of equal variances, or more precisely, the condition of homogeneity of the covariance matrix, was not confirmed, and deviation from the F statistical model occurred. Consequently, alternative tests, specifically the conservative Greenhouse-Geisser test, were used to examine within-subject effects.

Table 3. Results of Multivariate Analysis in Evaluating the Effect of the Independent Variable on Overall Scores

| Dependent Variable | Wilks' Lambda | F | P-Value | Effect Size |
|----------------------|---------------|--------|---------|-------------|
| Empathy | 0.279 | 34.874 | 0.000 | 0.721 |
| Communication Skills | 0.341 | 26.129 | 0.000 | 0.659 |
| Rumination | 0.156 | 73.203 | 0.000 | 0.844 |

Table 3 shows that the effect of implementing the independent variable on empathy, communication skills, and rumination was significant. Furthermore, Table 4 presents the results of the repeated measures analysis of

variance, explaining the effect of implementing the independent variable (existential group therapy) on the total scores of the dependent variables.

Table 4. Results of Repeated Measures ANOVA Exploring the Impact of the Independent Variable on Overall Scores

| Variable | Source | Sum of Squares | df | Mean square | F | sig | eta |
|----------|------------|----------------|-------|-------------|--------|-------|-------|
| Empathy | Group | 211.295 | 1 | 211.295 | 6.288 | 0.018 | 0.183 |
| | Time | 622.376 | 1.295 | 720.290 | 58.255 | 0.000 | 0.675 |
| | Time*Group | 284.356 | 1.295 | 219.498 | 43.983 | 0.000 | 0.611 |

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|------------|----------|-------|----------|---------|-------|-------|
| Communication Skills | Group | 1284.444 | 1 | 1284.444 | 14.584 | 0.029 | 0.145 |
| | Time | 940.467 | 1.239 | 759.252 | 48.272 | 0.000 | 0.633 |
| | Time*Group | 798.022 | 1.239 | 644.255 | 40.691 | 0.000 | 0.594 |
| Rumination | Group | 157.344 | 1 | 157.344 | 10.097 | 0.000 | 0.265 |
| | Time | 612.42 | 1.228 | 498.683 | 133.643 | 0.000 | 0.827 |
| | Time*Group | 639.267 | 1.228 | 520.542 | 139.501 | 0.000 | 0.833 |

The results of Table 4, which presents the repeated measures ANOVA, indicate that existential group therapy has a significant impact on improving empathy, communication skills, and reducing rumination. For empathy, a significant difference between groups was observed ($F = 6.288$, $p = 0.018$), and the effect of time was also significant ($F = 58.255$, $p = 0.000$), indicating an improvement in empathy over time. In terms of communication skills, the therapy showed a positive effect ($F = 14.584$, $p = 0.029$), with a significant effect of time ($F = 48.272$, $p = 0.000$). Additionally, rumination significantly decreased ($F = 10.097$, $p = 0.000$), with a very significant effect of time ($F = 133.643$, $p = 0.000$). The interaction between time and group was significant for all three variables, suggesting that the therapeutic effects of existential group therapy increased over time. These results confirm the importance and effectiveness of existential group therapy in enhancing psychological and behavioral aspects.

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of existential group therapy on empathy, communication skills, and rumination in patients experiencing prolonged grief. The findings revealed that existential group therapy is effective in enhancing empathy, and communication skills, and reducing rumination in these patients. This aligns with the findings of (Hvidt et al., 2020), who demonstrated that existential group therapy significantly enhanced empathic capacity in individuals facing various life challenges, including grief. Regarding the effectiveness of existential therapy on empathy, it can be said that this therapy often focuses on helping individuals find or create meaning in the face of life's challenges. For someone experiencing prolonged grief, finding meaning in their experiences can be a crucial step toward healing. Existential therapy promotes emotional adjustment; as individuals become more attuned to their feelings, they may also become more sensitive to the emotions of others, leading to increased empathy (Van Baarsen, 2002).

This shared humanity becomes a bridge that connects individuals and fosters collective empathy. Understanding that we all grapple with similar struggles can break down barriers and strengthen deeper connections (Sickels, 2023).

The findings also indicated that existential therapy is effective in enhancing communication skills. This aligns with the results of the study by (Amani, 2017). Existential therapy encourages individuals to express themselves openly and authentically, which can be particularly beneficial for those experiencing prolonged grief. This therapeutic approach provides a safe space

for grieving individuals to explore and articulate their feelings, thoughts, and experiences related to their loss, which can improve their ability to communicate with others outside the therapeutic environment (Khalafi kasalani et al., 2023). Existential therapy helps clients develop emotional intelligence by exploring their feelings, understanding their existential concerns, and learning to accept their experiences. Emotional intelligence is a crucial aspect of effective communication, as it enables individuals to understand and manage their emotions and respond appropriately to the emotions of others (Hilberdink et al., 2023).

Additionally, the results showed that existential therapy is effective in reducing rumination. This finding is supported by previous research on the impact of existential therapy on rumination in various contexts (Rezapour-Mirsaleh et al., 2023; Sodani et al., 2019). Existential therapy often emphasizes the importance of living in the present moment and recognizing the possibilities for choice and change. This can help individuals reduce their focus on past events and decrease ruminative thoughts (Mayer, 2021). One-way existential therapy can aid in reducing rumination is by encouraging self-awareness and introspection. By exploring their thoughts, emotions, and underlying beliefs, individuals can gain insight into the causes and triggers of their ruminative thinking. This increased self-awareness can lead to a better understanding of their thought patterns, allowing individuals to develop more adaptive mechanisms. Existential therapy emphasizes the importance of authenticity and self-acceptance. By embracing their thoughts and feelings, individuals can reduce the need to ruminate on negative experiences. Instead, they can focus on finding meaning and purpose in their lives, which can lead to a more positive outlook and reduced rumination (Buffardi, 2021).

Conclusion

Overall, the results indicate that existential group therapy is effective in enhancing empathy, and communication skills, and reducing rumination in individuals with prolonged grief. Limitations of this study include the lack of random selection of participants, reliance solely on questionnaires for data collection, the heterogeneity of participants' cultural, economic, and social backgrounds, and the lack of investigation into these conditions. It is recommended that future research utilize random sampling for participant selection and incorporate interview methods for data collection. Additionally, due to their significance, it is suggested that cultural, economic, and social conditions be examined in future studies.

Reliance on questionnaires for data collection,

differences in the cultural, economic, and social conditions of participants, and the lack of investigation into these conditions. Future research is recommended to randomly select participants and to utilize interview methods for data collection. Additionally, it is suggested that cultural, economic, and social conditions be examined due to their importance.

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