

Original Article

## The Effect of Group Counseling "Narrative Therapy" to reduce Depression and Loneliness among older women<sup>1</sup>

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**Objectives:** The main objective of this study was to determine the effectiveness of narrative therapy and group counseling on depression and loneliness among elderly women.

**Methods:** This is a quasi experimental research method using post-test design with a control group. 24 women were selected from all the elderly women referring to Iranian Alzheimer's Association in 2012 through randomized sampling method and have been assigned to experiment and control groups. The tools for assessing depression and loneliness were the Geriatric Depression Scale and the Loneliness questionnaire. The experiment group had eight 90 -minute sessions of group counseling narrative therapy which took place once a week. The collected data have been statically analyzed using independent t -test in SSPS-19.

**Results:** The findings showed that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the experiment and control group and it can be argued that employing narrative therapy group counseling was influential in reducing depression and loneliness ( $P<0.01$ ).

**Discussion:** The effect of group counseling narrative therapy on reducing depression and loneliness of elderly women has been confirmed by the results of this study. Based on the findings, conducting narrative therapy group counseling is strongly recommended in health care organizations for the elderly people.

**Keywords:** narrative therapy, group counseling, depression, loneliness, elderly

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### Introduction

There are so many changes in the human's life due to aging and approaching to the geriatric phase that include most importantly of loss, loneliness and social isolation, poverty, feeling of rejection, trying to find the meaning of life, dependence, despair and hopelessness, fear of death and dying, grieving the death of the others, regretting the past and concerns about deterioration of mind and body. These changes can make special problems in this transitional stage, therefore it requires specific consideration. These concerns and approaching to the end of life and to death, compels a particular stress on the elderly people which loneliness and depression are more noticeable among them (1). Depression in old age affected about 5/6 million of Americans aged 65 and older which has been considered as the second cause

of disability in this phase. People with the history of depression, will experience it more intensive in their old ages (2). The previous studies showed that one third of the old outpatients attending to psychiatric clinics suffer from most common mental disorders such as depression, cognitive and anxiety disorders respectively. The mild forms of depression are so common in old people as well (3, 4).

Loneliness in elderly is one of the main excruciating problems that is not sufficiently considered whereas 25 to 50 percent of all people older than 65 years in different populations have experienced this feeling due to their age and gender (4, 5) they have explained elderly stage as the period of loneliness and been afraid of this unpleasant experience (6). Heravi (4) suggested that all of their interviewees had endured some degrees of loneliness and 34% of

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them felt severe loneliness. Dadkhah (2008) reported that 39 % of the participants in his study had suffered from loneliness feeling (7). A review of literature on loneliness in older people shows that this is the most common cause of mental disequilibrium (8, 9) Experts believe that any attempt to resolve the feeling of loneliness in older people will stand against their complex psychological problems and on the other hand improve their self-esteem (10), meanwhile, the successful treatment of loneliness feeling may reduce the risk of its serious consequences such as depression (11).

Studies in this field show that most elderly people live with their past memories as a convenient way to get rid of loneliness feeling so that reviewing these memories can improve their self esteem, self value, life satisfaction and reduce their depression and loneliness (2, 12). Older adults can remember and reconstruct the past events to resolve and to overcome the conflicts derived from them. Meanwhile they enjoy remembering the happy times they used to be more powerful and productive. This review of life is a very important and healthy process that people need (2). One of the approaches helpful in reminding and reconstructing the older adults' past is "Narrative Therapy". Narrative Therapy is a relatively new approach affected by sociocultural philosophy of Foucault (13) that is planned to deal with the individual problems and reconstruct the past (14). In fact, in this approach every human being tells a story of his/her own life about who they are and what is important to them (15). Events gain meaning from stories of life. Some of these narratives are self consciously shaped by personal experiences and some others are affected by the strong and dominant culture of the community. As a matter of fact, the narratives of people influence their identities (16). The main assumptions of this approach are: a) Individual stories and narratives determine their feeling and behaviors; b) Emotional disorders are resulting from the dominant problematic narratives; c) Changing these narratives and stories can reduce most of emotional disorders (13). In fact, according to this approach, problem experiences are produced by structured stories. So old stories must be deconstructed and new stories should be created to solve these problems (12).

The purpose of the implements in this approach is to assist the clients be able to externalize a difficult and overwhelming problem, deconstruct and rewrite their pessimistic stories to grow a consistent confidence in themselves and to replace the broken

identities with heroic status. Some of the main roles of narrative therapy in older adults include: improving self understanding, preserving personal and group memories and history, creating opportunities to understand the humanitarian laws, reinforcement of coping strategies, reducing depression regarding past conflicts and reconstructing their life stories (15, 17). Therefore, older adults can grow positive self concept about the situation and period of time they are living in through deconstructing their problematic stories and selecting a new narrative for living during group counseling narrative therapy sessions and to find the appropriate solutions to eliminate their depression and loneliness feelings. The main objective of this study was to determine the effectiveness of narrative therapy group counseling on depression and loneliness among elderly women.

### **Methods**

*Participants-* This is a quasi experimental study with the post test and control group design. The participants were selected using simple random sampling among 150 elderly women referred to the Iranian Alzheimer's Association during 2012. First, a list of all old women attending to this Association was provided, and then 30 women were randomly selected among them. At last 24 cases were chosen to participate in the study according to the inclusion criteria such as: 1) Lack of mental retardation based on their IQ evaluation in the files; 2) being at least 60 years old; 3) The ability to read and write in Persian; 4) Not attending in other groups. 12 participants were assigned randomly in each group as control and experiment group. Then 8 sessions of narrative therapy for 90 minutes were conducted for the experiment group. One week after the last session, depression and loneliness were evaluated as post test. The gathered data were analyzed using independent t test in SPSS-19. 8 sessions of group therapy were conducted for the control group at the end of study.

*Tools-* For assessing the depression and loneliness of participants in this study two tools as follow were used: Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS): Yesavage have developed this scale on 1982 consist of 30 questions reformed to 15 questions in short form on 1986 to evaluate depression in older adults (16). Numerous clinical and nonclinical studies confirmed internal and external validity of this scale in diagnosing clinical depression. Test retest reliability was 0.85 for this scale and the scores were significantly different in showing no depression,

moderate depression and severe depression which confirms the validity as well. The correlation between this scale and Hamilton Scale reported  $r=0.84$  and with Beck test was  $r=0.73$  (18, 19). Loneliness Scale: This questionnaire has 38 items in 5 degrees Likert-type scale from “very much” to “very little”. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of the questionnaire is reported 0.92. Also convergent/divergent validation of the scale calculated through its correlation with the Oxford Happiness Scale scores and UCLA feeling scale was respectively reported 0.6 and 0.68. The construct validity was confirmed by factor analysis (20).

## Results

There were two groups in this study composed of 12 elderly people with the average age 64 years ( $SD=2.8$ ) for the experimental and 65.5 for the control group. Therefore they were matched regarding age. Independent t- test were used to test the hypothesis “Narrative Therapy counseling can reduce depression and loneliness in older women”. Table (1) shows the comparison of post test means of depression between control and intervention groups.

**Table 1.** Comparing the post test means of depression between control and intervention groups

Group	Number	Mean	SD	Difference of means	df	t	Significance level
Intervention	12	6.06	3.02	-4.59	22	5.75	0.00*
Control	12	10.65	3.72				

\*  $P < 0.01$

According to the results obtained from post-test to compare the intervention and control groups in table(1) the calculated value of  $t$  is equal to (5.75) at ( $P < 0.01$ ) level which was significant and rejects the null hypothesis. This result suggests that narrative

therapy counseling was effective on reducing depression in older women. Table (2) shows the comparison of post test means of loneliness between control and intervention groups.

**Table 2.** Comparing the post test means of loneliness between control and intervention groups

Group	Number	Mean	SD	Difference of means	df	t	Significance level
Intervention	12	102.43	12.73	-28.07	22	6.54	0.00*
Control	12	130.5	16.31				

\*  $P < 0.01$

According to the results obtained from post-test to compare the intervention and control groups in table (2) the calculated value of “ $t$ ” is equal to (6.54) at ( $P < 0.01$ ) level which was significant and rejects the null hypothesis. This result suggests that narrative therapy counseling was effective on reducing loneliness feeling in older women.

## Discussion

The study indicated that narrative therapy counseling can reduce depression and loneliness among older women. These results are consistent with the results reported by Naziri, Ghaderi and Zare (19), suggesting that narrative approach could reduce depression in women of Marvdasht. Also the study findings about reduction of depression are similar to results from Zadeh-Mohammadi, Abedi, & Moradipناه, research on adolescents suffering from depression (21) and Bichescu et al study on three depressed women (22). Beck and steer (23) believes a depressed person

concludes that depression is necessary for life and looks back to all the unpleasant events in his/her own mind, therefore he/she will be disappointed and hopeless. In these situations, thoughts endure a very powerful negativism so that the person sees a dark and blurred world and would not be able to see the positive aspects and there are only negative aspects that he/she can think of therapeutic conversations in Narrative therapy help depressed people consider their own lives through particular stories and narrations. Then they've been asked to explain their pessimistic stories which are overfilled with feelings of failure, unhappiness and severe disappointment. During the treatment process, they use some techniques such as "Externalizing problems" to define their problems as phenomena distinct from their identities and are encouraged to fight with the problems out of themselves. Destruction of these cynical stories, separating self from the problems and seeking in the past to find unique outcomes or

“Shining moments”- those moments they behaved opposite to the problematic stories (16) , will give them a constant self confidence and make them change their broken identities to heroic status (14).

According, one of the depressive factors is when a person feels worthless about him/herself and his/her status; because the depressed person believes that people’s values are congruent to their opportunities so always thinks that he/she is weaker and lower than the others. Here, Narrative therapy facilitates recognizing individual capabilities and problems as well as encouraging their personal functioning through focus on their resources (15). Ching (24) also believes that narrative therapy with life review helps in improving senile cognitive orientation and prevents or eliminates older adults’ anxiety and depression. Results of the present study suggest that Narrative therapy is a counseling technique that could reduce the loneliness feeling among older women. Two key issues that can explain the effectiveness of narrative therapy on reducing the loneliness feelings are: a) the role of human interaction especially with peers and b) the role of catharsis and externalization of bitter/sweet memories, reorganizing them and clarification of previous blind spots. Payne (14) thinks that narrative therapy allows individuals to speak about what is important to them because of its focus on positive interactions and quality, and provides a supportive and comforting environment that enhances the communication and interaction between people.

Singer, Tracz and Dworkin (25) reminded that reviewing the past gives older adults the opportunity

to communicate with the people who have similar concerns and experiments. Since depression over the loss and changes in life is the main theme of elderly life, group can make a safe place for them to express their feelings of loneliness and despair and facilitates to overcome their isolation. In addition, group counseling narrative therapy provides the opportunity for seniors to rewrite their life stories and at the same time choose the appropriate communication strategies in relationship with family members and friends to recruit again and develop their relationships. This process was one of the main factors leading to the decline of loneliness in the elderly. As there are a lot of cultural diversities in our country, it is consider that narrative therapy is highly dependent on culture. Therefore, it is recommended that psychologists, counselors and social workers who work with the elderly, utilize the theoretical principles and the therapeutic process of this approach since proverbs, poetry, metaphor, story and narrative is interwoven with the lives of people and can be used as a very important therapeutic technique especially for the elderly.

As a Conclusion, the study findings have confirmed the role and effect of group counseling narrative therapy on reducing depression and loneliness in the elderly.

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