

## Effects of Group Counseling Sessions on Perceived Stress Among Undergraduate Students During COVID19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:** This study was aimed to assess the pre-test and post-test effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study was inspired by the fact of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on students' well-being during the pandemic. A true experiment design pretest posttest control group was employed in this study. Through purposive sampling, a total of 30 counseling students from a local university has been selected as representative of the sample population. Perceived-Stress Scale has been measured at pre and posttest. The results showed there are differences between the pre-test and post-test results after the experiment has been conducted by the researcher. This study provided valuable information about the appropriate intervention that can be used in order to cope with the group counseling session on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, students should be introduced early to the university counselling services so that they can learn about the knowledge and techniques of coping with stress issues.

**Keywords:** Counseling Sessions, Perceived Stress, Undergraduate Students, COVID19

### BACKGROUND

The study aimed to assess the effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Group counseling is a type of counseling in which a small group of people meets on a regular basis to discuss, interact, and explore problems with one another and the group leader (What Is Group Counseling, 2021). Perceived stress refers to an individual's feelings or thoughts about how much stress they are experiencing at a given point in time or over a given time period (Perceived-Stress, 2021). Within behavioral medicine research, perceived stress measures are frequently used to investigate the relationships between stress and health (Phillips, 2013).

The outbreak has started in China in December 2019, which has speedily spread across the globe and caused massive disruptions to everyone's everyday life (Kecojevic et al., 2020) including the students' life. Hence, every country taken to public health measures has been implemented to control the disease's transmission of the coronavirus (WHO, 2020). However, the steps taken to overcome this spread have affected the function of global higher education, causing them to use online learning platforms and putting pressure on students. In this situation, some students might have difficulties with access to computers and the internet connection at home (Sahu, 2019; Lederman, 2020) causing stress and possibly affecting the student's mental health.

This incident led Malaysia to record the highest increase in the COVID-19 infectious disease in Asia within a week. Hence, steps to reduce the pandemic were instantaneously taken by the Malaysian government where the nationwide "Movement Control Order" was declared on 18

March 2020 to control the viral outbreak (Sundarassen et al., 2020). The step includes quarantining of infected people and social distancing was accomplished to restrict the virus's spread and decrease interactions with people infected with COVID-19. This MCO has left the Malaysian population in a state of social isolation for a long time. These steps have changed people's lifestyle and social relations and may increase people's anxiety and fear of infection. Thus, in order to reduce the outbreak of COVID-19 in efficacious ways, measures are taken such as lockdown, social distancing, emergency remote teachings, uncertainty, and delays in commencement of schools, and high education institutions have significant implications on the student's well-being (Sundarassen et al., 2020).

In addition, in order to prevent the COVID-19 virus from spreading widely among employees and young people, higher education institutions across the country have rapidly switched from face-to-face learning to online learning (Nature Editorial, 2020)). This caused the students' lives to have dramatically changed as they have been asked to leave campus, adjust to a new living circumstance, and use the online learning platforms (Kecojevic et al., 2020). The switch to online learning, especially in courses that were not originally designed for online learning possibly has increased stress among students (Kecojevic et al., 2020). Courses designed that include high levels of interaction and hands-on experiences such as practicum students, labs, and artistic performance have a clear defect in regards to the evaluation of students (Sahu, 2019). These changes have affected the well-being of university students.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The problem statement of the study is based on the previous studies. Firstly, college students in China reported significant adverse effects on the students' psychological well-being and high levels of anxiety (Cao et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). To date, the majority of the research has been conducted in China and Western countries, mainly among the general population, healthcare workers, and medical students. However, there is no such studies have been conducted in Malaysia, yet (Sundarassen et al., 2020).

Secondly, the majority of participants answered that they have not used the university counseling service during the pandemic (Son et al., 2020). Since finding shows that are low students take counseling support, this experimental research is warranted to access the effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the results can be used as their information because they realize that counseling support can effectively cope with their stress.

Besides, the long-term mental health impact of COVID-19, which takes weeks or months to become fully apparent, and managing this impact needs concerted effort not only from psychiatrists but from the health care system at large (Rajkumar, 2020). However, there is a need for further research, even in the form of preliminary or pilot studies, to assess the scope of this pandemic in other countries (Rajkumar, 2020), likely suited to conducts Malaysia during the pandemic because Malaysia has been hit by the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic since 20 September 2020 and the number of COVID-19 cases began to increase to three figures (MOH, 2020). Therefore, this study hopes to expand the existing literature by empirically assessing the impact of stress on the mental health of college students at the peak of the epidemic.

**The main objective of the study:** To assess the pretest-posttest effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Research Hypothesis

H<sub>0</sub>1: There are no significant differences in group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic at pretest and posttest.

## METHODOLOGY

Experimental research is research conducted with a scientific approach using two sets of variables. The first set serves as a constant against which the differences in the second set are measured. Experimentation is used in quantitative research methods, for example. The independent variable of this study is stress, and the dependent variable is mental health. The researcher used a pilot test to access the pre-test and post-test on the independent variable and the dependent variable to collect data-target groups through online surveys such as Google Forms because it is self-managed such as WhatsApp. The target may be easy to access because this application does not use much data, and almost all targets use this application. This makes the survey more efficient for data collection because this is where the WhatsApp application has become popular as a mobile learning style and regards as one of the communication platforms since many students nowadays have their own smartphone (Izyani, 2016). The influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable is usually observed and recorded over a period of time to help researchers draw reasonable conclusions about the relationship between the two types of variables. The research instruments included two questionnaires the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), which aims to investigate the association between perceived stress and major life event stressor and a few counseling therapies theory as sintervention for stress management. Researchers were collecting data-target groups through online surveys such as Google Forms and WhatsApp. The target population was undergraduate students. The researcher conducted an empirical study to test the reliability of the research questionnaire. Cronbach's Alpha on participants resulting in the alpha coefficient is .811 which is considered reliable questionnaires. After collecting the data, all the data will be entered into the frequency and percentage to determine if the prediction study supports the research questions about the effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID19 pandemic.

**Table 1. Intervention Process**

Group	Pretest		Treatment (1 Month)	Post Test
Experimental Group (EG)	Mental Health Screening Questionnaire (Perceived Stress Scale)	Random Assignments	W1   W2   W3   W4	W4
Control Group (CG)	Questionnaire (Perceived Stress Scale)		No Treatment	Mental Health Screening Questionnaire (Perceived Stress Scale)
Marathon Group Counseling Sessions				
Group	Pretest		Treatment (Marathon)	Post Test
Experimental Group (EG)	Mental Health Screening Questionnaire (Perceived Stress Scale)	Random Assignments	Day 1	Day 2
			Stress Intervention	Mental Health Screening Questionnaire (Perceived Stress Scale)

Random assignment is a method of randomly assigning participants from your sample to different treatment groups. With simple random assignment, each member of the sample has a

known or equal chance of being assigned to either the control or experimental groups (Random Assignment in Experiments | An Easy Introduction, 2021). After randomly assigning a group of participants, each participant is randomly assigned to either the control group or the experimental group (Kendra Cherry, 2019). Students in the control group actively took part in counseling sessions as stress management interventions in order to assess the differences between the pretest and post-test.

Structure of Group Counseling Sessions	
Session	Type of Intervention
First session	➤ Initial or rapport
Second session	➤ Psychoeducation
	➤ Goal Setting
Third session	➤ Application of Reality Therapy (5 Basic Needs)
	➤ Exploration
Forth Session	➤ Application of Reality Therapy (Total Behavior)
	➤ Treatment
Fifth Session	➤ Application of Reality Therapy (WDEP)
	➤ Termination

Table 1 shows the process of the stress intervention conducted by the researcher. The treatment for the experiment group was conducted in a month and before conducting the experiment, the researcher gave the mental health screening questionnaire to the samples. Besides that, during the experiment process, the researcher has used the marathon method due to some obstacles such as Movement Control Oder (MCO) 3.0 in Sarawak, limited time, and limited place. After the experiment was finished, the experiment group and the control group has answered the same questionnaire in order to see the changes between the results of the pretest and post-test.

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### Findings (Demographic Data Summary)

**Table 2. Frequency of Gender**

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Female	23	76.7
	Male	7	23.3
	Total	30	100.0

According to Table 2 above, 30 students participated in this study. There are 23 female responses and 7 male respondents, for a total of (76.7%)t and (23.3%), respectively. In comparison to male respondents, females outnumber males.

**Table 3: Frequency of Age**

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Age 19-20	2	6.7
	Age of 21-22	15	50.0
	Age of 23-24	13	43.3
	Total	30	100.0

Based on the table above, the highest number of respondents that were answering the questionnaires are 20-21 years old students with an equivalent of 15 (50%) out of 30 respondents. The second highest group were students from 22-23 years old with 13 (43.3%) respondents. Meanwhile, the lowest group were from 19-20 years old students which 2 (6.7%) respondents only.

**Descriptive Statistic**

**Table 4. Descriptive Statistic**

	Group	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	
PSS AT PRETEST	Experiment Group	55	1	3	2.03	.615
	Control Group	15				
PSS AT POST-TEST	Experiment Group	15	1	3	1.50	.630
	Control Group	15				
Valid N (listwise)		0				

Table 4 shows the mean score of the effects of stress on perceived stress among Counseling students during the pandemic. The minimum and maximum of the rating scale of 1: Low Stress, 2 Moderate Stress, and 3: High Perceived Stress. The table reflects that the high mean value 2.03 and the low is 1.50 achieved from the experiment which shows that there a manipulation happened in the pre-test and post-test results. However, the standard deviation indicates that the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) at the pre-test is higher than the post-test.

**Research Findings**

**Table 5. Pretest Result for Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)**

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Low Stress	5	16.7
	Moderate Stress	19	63.3
	High Perceived Stress	6	20.0
	Total	10	100.0

***Post-test result for Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)***

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Low Stress	17	56.70
	Moderate Stress	11	93.30
	High Perceived Stress	2	6.7
	Total	10	100.0

This experimental study is made up for counseling students to see the pretest and post-test about the effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The respondents of the pretest in the experimental group consisted of 30 students. Thus, the result for the pretest shows in Table 6 above, there are 6 (20%) respondents who show the highest perceived stress score, and the second-highest were moderate stress which included 19 (63.30%) of 30 respondents. Meanwhile, there is only 5 (16.70%) of them show a low-stress scale. The respondents of the post-test in the experimental group consisted of 30 students. Thus, the result for the post-test shows there are 2 (6.70%) respondents who show the highest perceived stress score, and half of them were moderate stress which included 11 (93.30%) of 30 respondents. Meanwhile, there are more respondents 17 (56.7%) of them show a low-stress scale.

**Table 6. Paired Samples Statistics**

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	PSS AT PRETEST	2.03	30	.615
	PSS AT POST-TEST	1.50	30	.630

Table 6 above reflects that the high mean value 2.03 and the low is 1.50 achieved from the experiment which shows that there a manipulation happened in the pre-test and post-test results. However, the standard deviation indicates that the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) at the pretest is higher than the post-test. In these results, the estimate for the samples means the difference in the perceived stress scale is 1.03. The researcher can be 95% confident that the samples mean the difference is between 0.677 and 3.723.

**Table 7. Paired Samples Correlations**

		N	Correlations	Sig.
Pair 1	PSS AT PRETEST & POST-TEST	30	.668	.000

The paired sample t-test, also known as the dependent sample t-test, is a statistical process for determining if the mean difference between two groups of observations is zero. Each subject or entity is measured twice in a paired sample t-test, resulting in pairs of observations (Statistics Solutions, 2021). The researcher has considered measuring the result of the perceived stress scale of samples before and after completing the intervention and analyze the differences using a paired sample t-test. As a result, the Paired Samples Correlation table adds the information that pretest and post-test scores are significantly positively correlated ( $r = .668$ ). There are significant effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among the undergraduate student because the  $p = 0.000$  means the null hypothesis is rejected since  $p < 0.05$  (in fact  $p = .000$ ).

**Table 8. Paired Samples Test**

		Paired Differences					T	f	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pretest	.533	.507	.093	.344	.723	5.757		.000
	Post-Test							9	

Based on the row observe the t statistic,  $t = 5.757$ , and  $p = 0.000$ , the null hypothesis is rejected, since  $p < 0.05$ . There is strong evidence ( $t = 5.757$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) that the counseling session intervention able to manipulate the effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students. The decision is to reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there is a difference in the effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among Counseling students before and after running the intervention. In this data set, it decreases the perceived stress scale among the samples, on average, by approximately 29 points. The 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference has shown the differences from 0.344 to .723, this confirms that the difference in scale is statistically significant.

### Hypothesis

There are significant effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic because the  $p = 0.000$  means the null hypothesis is rejected, since  $p < 0.05$  (in fact  $p = .000$ ). Ho1 was rejected.

### DISCUSSION

The experimental results from the pretest and post-test study are presented and examined in detail. The effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic are explained, and various implications for design are discussed. As the research objectives are to assess the pretest and the post-test effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. As in view of the previous study, college students in China reported significant adverse effects on students' psychological well-being and high levels of anxiety (Cao et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Bao et al., 2020). To date, the majority of the research has been conducted in China and Western countries, mainly among the general population, healthcare workers, and medical students. However, there is no such studies have been conducted in Malaysia, yet (Sundarasan et al., 2020). As findings of this study, there are effects of the pandemic on the well-being among the undergraduate students in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). This is because the mean of pre-test results shows there are 6 (20%) respondents who show the highest perceived stress score, and the second-highest were moderate stress which included 19 (63.30%) of 30 respondents. Meanwhile, there is only 5 (16.70%) of them show a low-stress scale.

In a previous study, the majority of participants answered that they have not used the university counseling service during the pandemic (Son et al., 2020). Since finding shows that are low students take counseling support, this experimental research is warranted to access the effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the results can be used as their information because they realize

that counseling support can effectively cope with their stress. As findings of this study show that group counseling sessions able to support student's well-being. There is strong evidence ( $t = 5.757, p = 0.000$ ) that the counseling session intervention able to manipulate the effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students. This study shows that group counseling able to decrease the effects of perceived stress among the students.

Based on the previous studies, the long-term mental health impact of COVID-19, which takes weeks or months to become fully apparent, and managing this impact needs concerted effort not only from psychiatrists but from the health care system at large (Rajkumar, 2020). However, there is a need for further research, even in the form of preliminary or pilot studies, to assess the scope of this pandemic in other countries (Rajkumar, 2020), likely suited to conducts Malaysia during the pandemic because Malaysia has been hit by the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic since 20 September 2020 and the number of COVID-19 cases began to increase to three figures (MOH, 2020). Therefore, the results of the pilot study in this study were Alpha values above 0.7 are generally regarded as excellent and satisfactory, those above 0.8 as pretty good, and those above 0.9 as indicating exceptional internal consistency (Cronbach, 1951). Cronbach's alpha on samples resulting in the alpha coefficient is .811 which is considered that the items have relatively high internal consistency.

This research discusses the effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because the outbreak has started in China in December 2019, which has speedily spread across the globe and caused massive disruptions to everyone's everyday life (Kecojevic et al., 2020) included the students' life. Hence, every country taken to public health measures has been implemented to control the disease's transmission of the coronavirus (WHO, 2020). However, the steps taken to overcome this spread have affected the function of global higher education, causing them to use online learning platforms and putting pressure on students. In this situation, some students might have difficulties with access to computers and the internet connection at home (Sahu, 2019) caused stress and possibly affects the student's mental health.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS**

Based on the results of the study shows there are changes that happened before the experiment conducted and after the experiment is done in terms of the stress scales among the undergraduate students. There is strong evidence ( $t = 5.757, p = 0.000$ ) that the conducted intervention effective to decrease the perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important for practice because of the interventions that used to manipulate the effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a previous study, the majority of participants answered that they have not used the university counseling service during the pandemic (Son et al., 2020). Since finding shows that are low students take counseling support, this experimental research is warranted to access the effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students. Therefore, the results can be used as their information because they realize that counseling support can effectively cope with their stress. Thus, the results prove that the interventions can be applied to those who are having stress emotion in the future. The intervention is included the counseling practice, which is the counseling group.

The findings show that the counseling practice able to reduce the perceived stress among the students during this COVID-19 pandemic due to the class conducted online platform. Therefore, it might bring pressure on students because learning is supposed to be conducted physically, so most of them may not be able to cope with this situation. College support services



may have a crucial role in helping and guide students navigate the life challenges associated with the pandemic might help to improve their well-being.

## **LIMITATIONS**

There are many types of obstacles that may affect the results of the research. Firstly, the research is only conducted in a single institution which in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), and one faculty which is the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development (FCSHD), so it is difficult to generalize the results to students from other universities in Malaysia. The second is the samples are only from Counseling Program. Besides that, as a result of the findings on the descriptive statistics, there is a need for further research to assess the scope of this pandemic among other undergraduate students. This because there were only 15 samples that participated in the experimental research due to the pandemic of COVID-19. Sarawak would follow suit by extending the countrywide Movement Control Order (MCO) from June 15 to June 28, according to Datuk Amar Douglas Uggah Embas, head of the State Disaster Management Committee (SDMC) (BP Editor 11, 2021). The movement control order (MCO) in Sarawak has been extended with the existing standard operating procedure (SOP) maintained (Malay Mail, 2021). Therefore, the researcher able to conduct the treatment experiment on the samples only due to the Counselling Laboratory has been closed during the MCO and limited place to conduct the treatment experiment.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study assessed the effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature review was concentrated on the effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on these findings, there are changes between the pretest and post-test the effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students. As the result show, there are many students faced stress situation during the pandemic, but after the treatment process which the control group was involved and the other are in the control group. The post-test shows changes in the answers to the mental health screening questionnaire. Lastly, the outcome reflects that the method that the researcher used for the experimental group is able to help them decrease their stress. There is strong evidence ( $t = 5.757$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) that the counseling session intervention able to manipulate the effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students. This means that the stress intervention used by the researcher is effective to help the students decrease their perceived stress compared to those who are not involved in the intervention.

Although certain the experiment for experiment groups was conducted used the marathon method. Marathon group therapy poses a fundamental challenge to traditional time management in that it is characterized by continuous sessions lasting one or more days. Meetings of one or two hours duration are held on a regular basis (Stoller,1968). This approach has been utilized as an addition to the standard course of psychotherapy by therapists with excellent outcomes. The Marathon is typically held in the middle of treatment, allowing the therapist to become completely familiar with the patient's difficulties while simultaneously continuing therapy after the Marathon (Martin, 1972). The most important here was the samples were agreed to join the marathon counseling session. As the result, it is good and effective to join counseling sessions in order to control the student's perceived stress issue. The outcome reflects that there are significant effects of group counseling sessions on perceived stress among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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