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# The Application of Psychoanalytic Counseling to Reduce Self-injury Behavior among High School Students

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Self-injury behavior in adolescents, linked to emotional distress and trauma, is a growing concern. It can negatively impact academic performance and well-being during this critical developmental stage. Psychoanalytic counseling, which addresses unconscious processes and emotional conflicts, offers a unique approach to managing these behaviors. **Objective:** This study aims to examine the effectiveness of psychoanalytic counseling in reducing self-injury habits in high school students. This research was conducted at SMA Negeri 11 Bandung City. **Method:** This study uses a quasi-experimental approach. The instruments used include the Self Injury Questionnaire, Observation, and In-depth Interview: Psychoanalytic Counseling Evaluation Checklist. Data analysis used paired t-test and ANOVA statistical tests. **Results:** The results of the analysis yielded a Sig. (2-tailed) value of 0.002 < 0.05, this means that psychoanalytic counseling is effective in reducing the habit of self-injury in high school students. Significant differences in pretest and posttest mean scores indicate that this approach can help students reduce self-injurious behavior. **Conclusion:** Schools can integrate psychoanalytic counseling as part of the guidance and counseling program to help students who experience self-injurious behavior. **Contribution:** The findings from this study can serve as a basis for schools to emphasize the importance of further mental health support. It may also influence the development of a mental health-based curriculum in secondary schools.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Habits are behaviors that have been done repeatedly. Habit can be interpreted as a pattern for responding to certain situations that an individual learns and repeatedly does for the same thing (Hagger, 2019). In addition to this definition, habits are also defined as ways identical to customs or acts (behaviors) done repeatedly. Everyone's habits are certainly different because habits are formed from experiences that the individual has experienced or are often done (Henriksen, 2016). This results in the discovery

of many unique habits. Based on their nature, habits are divided into good and bad habits. Good habits are usually shown by positive actions such as diligent exercise, diligent cleaning of the room, and diligent study (Karppinen et al., 2018). Bad habits are usually shown by negative things or actions such as those done by the counselee, namely scratching his hands with sharp objects until sometimes bleeding. The counselee's habit of hurting his hands is almost done when he feels extreme anxiety (Isabe & Filipe, 2023).

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In psychology, these actions are categorized as self-injury behavior. Self-injury is a form of behavior that individuals do to overcome anxiety by hurting themselves, and the individual does it intentionally and does not intend to commit suicide (Paul et al., 2015). Self-injury is a cruel and destructive coping mechanism. Although Self-injury is a bad act, it is a behavior that most people often engage in (Tang et al., 2018). This is because Self-injury is a defense mechanism for individuals and can lead to addiction. Self-injury occurs because the individual wants to cope with emotional pain or to relieve the chronic emptiness that exists in the individual (Vega et al., 2017). The worst impact of Self-injury is damage to the tissue and can be affected by one of the psychiatric disorders such as OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) (Whittington & Holland, 2020). Therefore, it is recommended that sufferers of self-injury be examined by a mental specialist or handled directly by a counselor so that direct action can be given in the form of counseling. One of the therapies in counseling that is suitable for reducing self-injury habits is applying Psychoanalytic counseling (Störkel et al., 2023).

Self-injury or self-injurious behavior is a form of maladaptive behavior often found in adolescents, including high school students (Nicol et al., 2022). This behavior usually arises as a response to emotional distress, stress, or inability to manage emotions. Self-injury can take the form of self-harm, such as cutting, scratching, or burning the skin, which is done without suicidal intent but to relieve psychological distress or gain a sense of control over a particular situation (Kostić et al., 2019).

In research on the effectiveness of psychoanalytic counseling to reduce self-injury habits in high school students, several research gaps need to be considered (Harpazi et al., 2023). This study used a psychoanalytic approach, including various techniques and interventions. Further research is needed to compare the effectiveness of various techniques in psychoanalytic counseling, such as transference analysis or interpretation techniques, in the context of high school students who self-injure.

Psychoanalysis, as one of the counseling approaches, offers an in-depth understanding of the root causes of such behavior (Hofmann, 2014). It explores internal conflicts, childhood experiences, and unconscious dynamics influencing individual behavior patterns. In the context of self-injury, psychoanalytic counseling aims to help students understand and overcome the emotional conflicts underlying the behavior to replace them with more adaptive coping mechanisms (Kurniawan et al., 2024).

Research on the effectiveness of psychoanalytic counseling to reduce self-injury among high school students is important, given the high prevalence of this behavior among adolescents. Understanding the extent to which the psychoanalytic approach can positively impact can pro-

vide practical recommendations for counselors, teachers, and parents in supporting students' mental health.

Self-injury problems in students are often a response to feeling depressed, unable to control emotions, or feeling unappreciated. Factors influencing this behavior may include academic stress, social pressure, family problems, traumatic experiences, and mental disorders such as depression or anxiety. The diverse causes make it difficult to identify the root of the problem. Students who self-injure may feel there is no other way to release pain or gain control over their feelings. If not treated appropriately, self-injury behaviors can develop into more serious mental health issues, such as major depression, anxiety disorders, or even suicidal ideation. Students who engage in self-injury behaviors tend to have more complex psychological disorders that affect their overall lives. Neglected mental health can lead to decreased academic performance, impaired social relationships, and an inability to cope with stress in daily life.

High school students are often in a complex stage of emotional development, where they face academic, social, and personal pressures. Psychoanalysis offers an approach that helps them understand their emotions and experiences more deeply, which can support the reduction of self-injury behaviors. Although psychoanalytic counseling has the potential to reduce self-injury behaviors in high school students, there are many challenges in its application, ranging from relevance to the adolescent context, implementation limitations in schools, and lack of cultural support. Further research is needed to bridge this gap, both by tailoring psychoanalytic approaches to the needs of high school students and by integrating psychoanalysis into the school counseling system practically and effectively.

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of psychoanalytic counseling in reducing the self-injury habits of high school students. The counselee's habit of hurting his hands is almost done when he feels extreme anxiety. In psychology, these actions are categorized as Self-injury behavior.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1 Research Design

This study uses a quasi-experimental approach to measure the effectiveness of psychoanalytic counseling in reducing self-injury habits in high school students. The research design used was a pretest-posttest control group design (Yazici & Bulut, 2018), in which an experimental group received psychoanalytic counseling intervention and a control group did not.

2.2 Research Object

This research was conducted at SMAN 11 Bandung in 2024. The research subjects were high school students who showed self-injury habits based on initial screening results using measuring instruments such as the Self-Harm Inventory (SHI) or relevant questionnaires. The selection of subjects was carried out by purposive sampling, with the criteria of (1) 15-18 years old; (2) Experiencing self-injury in the last six months; (3) Willing to participate in the psychoanalysis counseling program.

The number of subjects in the experimental and control groups was each determined based on sample size analysis to ensure the validity of the research results.

2.3 Instrumen

The instruments used include (1) Self-Injury Questionnaire, Measuring the frequency, intensity, and motivation of self-injury before and after the intervention; (2) an Observation, Recording changes in student behavior during the counseling process; (3) In-depth Interview: For an exploration of psychological factors that influence self-injury behavior; (4) Psychoanalytic Counseling Evaluation Checklist: Assessing students' engagement in the counseling session.

Data Collection includes (1) Pretest data collected before the intervention began, posttest data collected after all counseling sessions were completed, and (2) Interviews and observations were conducted periodically to support quantitative results.

Table 1. Paired Samples Test Results

|        |                     | Paired Samples Test |                 |                 |   |        | t       | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|---|--------|---------|----|-----------------|
|        |                     | Paired Differences  |                 |                 |   |        |         |    |                 |
|        |                     | Mean                | Std. Error Mean | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference |        |         |    |                 |
|        |                     |                     |                 |                 | lower                                     | Upper  |         |    |                 |
| Pair 1 | Pre Test – PosTtest | -13,021             | 11,964          | 3,302           | -20,312                                   | -5,811 | -03,912 | 12 | ,002            |

The results of the analysis resulted in a Sig. (2-tailed) of 0.002 <0.05, the interpretation of these results reveals an average difference between the pretest and posttest interventions. The conclusion shows that psychoanalytic counseling is effective in reducing the self-injury habits of high school students.

The paired t-test results show that psychoanalytic counseling is effective in reducing the self-injury habits of high school students. Significant differences in pretest and posttest mean scores indicate that this approach can help students reduce self-injurious behavior.

This study supports the use of psychoanalytic counseling as one of the psychological interventions to treat adolescent self-injury. These results can also be a basis for

2.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis process used statistical tests such as paired t-test or ANOVA to compare pretest and posttest scores in the experimental and control groups. Qualitative analysis from interviews and observations was also analyzed using a thematic approach to identify patterns that emerged during the counseling process.

2.5 Research Procedure

The Preparation Stage includes (1) Conducting initial screening to identify students who meet the research criteria and (2) Developing a psychoanalytic counseling plan based on psychoanalytic principles, such as past exploration, unconscious dynamics, and emotional conflict resolution. Implementation of the Intervention includes (1) experimental group psychoanalytic counseling conducted in groups, with the duration of each session around 60-90 minutes; (2) counseling conducted by school counselors using a psychoanalytic approach.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

The paired t-test was used to compare the mean self-injury scores before and after the psychoanalytic counseling intervention. The following are the results of the statistical analysis:

educational practitioners and counselors to apply similar approaches in dealing with similar cases. The description of the results of changes in student behavior after the intervention can be explained in the following table:

Table 2. Data Description of Students' Self-injury Level

| Interview & observation time | Self injury intensity |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Pre-Counseling               | Very Frequent         |
| Counseling 1st Meeting       | Often                 |
| Counseling 2nd Meeting       | Occasionally          |
| Counseling 3rd Meeting       | Controllable          |

Based on the table presented, there was a significant decrease in the intensity of self-injury behaviors in the individuals observed during the psychoanalytic counseling process. At the pre-counseling stage, self-injury behavior occurred very frequently. After the first counseling meeting, the frequency decreased to frequent, then to occasional in the second meeting, and controllable in the third meeting.

This decrease shows that psychoanalytic counseling is effective in helping individuals reduce self-injury behavior. The counseling process allows individuals to understand and address the emotional conflicts underlying the behavior, thus improving their ability to manage stress and negative emotions more adaptively.

However, follow-up evaluation and ongoing individual monitoring are recommended to ensure long-term effectiveness. A comprehensive approach, including support from family and social environment, is also important to support the recovery process and prevention of relapse of self-injury behavior.

### 3.2. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that psychoanalytic counseling effectively reduces self-injury habits in high school students. This finding underscores the importance of the psychoanalytic approach in understanding and treating self-injury behaviors, which are often influenced by deep psychological factors, such as emotional conflict and past trauma.

The psychoanalytic approach explores the unconscious mind to identify the root causes of self-injury behavior. In this study, the counseling process enabled students to (1) Express pent-up emotions, such as pain, anger, or frustration; (2) Identify negative thought patterns or past conflicts that trigger self-injury habits; (3) Develop healthier coping mechanisms in dealing with stress or emotional distress. The significant difference between the mean self-injury scores at the pretest and post-test indicates that psychoanalytic counseling was successful in helping students replace self-injury habits with more adaptive responses.

Students tend to be more prone to self-injury behaviors as they are in a developmental phase full of emotional stress, identity search, and hormonal changes. Some of the main factors that contribute to self-injury include (1) Academic stress and pressure to perform, which can trigger excessive anxiety; (2) Interpersonal conflict, problems with friends, family, or partners; (3) Past trauma, unresolved negative experiences.

According to psychoanalytic theory (Metallo et al., 2021; Rose, 2012; Heidarizadeh, 2015), self-injurious behavior is a manifestation of unconscious conflicts and self-defense mechanisms (Smith, & Power, 2015). The act is considered a way for individuals to cope with feelings of

helplessness, anxiety, or frustration that cannot be expressed verbally. Meanwhile, social learning theory states that self-injurious behavior is learned through observing and imitating others who exhibit similar behavior (Eddy, 2018). Factors such as positive or negative reinforcement from the social environment may reinforce the behavior (DeSmet et al., 2016). According to cognitive theory, this approach focuses on the individual's mindset that may be distorted or dysfunctional, such as feelings of worthlessness or inability to cope with stress. Self-injurious behavior is considered an attempt to distract from negative feelings or to feel a sense of control over an uncontrollable situation (Baer et al., 2018).

Psychoanalytic theory, developed by Sigmund Freud (Fedotova, 2013; Dumitrescu, 2013; Rizzolatti et al., 2014) can be used to help individuals experiencing psychological problems, including self-injury behavior Lane et al., 2015). Psychoanalysis focuses on understanding and processing unconscious conflicts that may be causing the behavior (Yakeley & Meloy, 2012). Psychoanalytic-based counseling aims to explore past experiences and identify psychological patterns that may contribute to self-destructive behavior (Simon, 2015).

Psychoanalytic counseling, focusing on deep emotional exploration, provides a safe space for students to understand and address these factors (Sitzer & Stockwell, 2015). This discussion confirms that psychoanalytic counseling is an effective approach to reducing self-injury habits in high school students. This approach helps students reduce self-injurious behavior and increases their understanding of the underlying emotional conflicts. Thus, psychoanalytic counseling has the potential to contribute significantly to students' psychological well-being.

Further analysis showed that students who participated in psychoanalytic counseling experienced significant changes in self-injury behavior (Sun et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2021). Most students reported decreased frequency and intensity of self-injurious behaviors after attending counseling sessions. Some students identified more adaptive coping mechanisms, such as talking to close people or writing, to manage their feelings (Saravanan et al., 2019).

One of the relevant studies in this regard is that conducted by Lyons (2015), Costa et al. (2021), Briggs et al. (2019), and Gonzales & Bergstrom (2013) revealed that psychoanalytic counseling could be an effective approach in helping students who engage in self-injury behavior. This approach focuses on understanding the behavior's psychological dynamics and helping individuals develop healthier coping mechanisms. However, despite the positive evidence, more research must be done to assess its wider applicability in various school settings and improve existing techniques and interventions.

Psychoanalytic counseling has significant effectiveness in reducing self-injury habits in high school students.

The significant reduction in self-injury scores, increased self-awareness, and behavioral changes in students who participated in counseling indicate that the psychoanalytic approach is effective in dealing with this problem. Psychoanalytic counseling enables students to understand and address the emotional conflicts underlying self-injury behavior, as well as provide them with skills to manage healthier feelings (Kurniawan et al., 2024). Therefore, psychoanalytic counseling can be used as an alternative intervention in addressing mental health problems among students.

This research, with a focus on the application of psychoanalytic counseling to reduce self-injury among high school students, can have several aspects of novelty as follows:

First, the focus is on self-injury in the school context. The novelty of this study reveals self-injury behavior as the main focus, particularly in the school setting, which is often less explored in previous studies. This finding contributes by providing new insights into how psychoanalytic counseling can be specifically applied to address self-injury issues in schools.

Second, integration with the school system. The novelty of this research reveals the importance of integrating psychoanalytic approaches into the school counseling system, creating an environment that supports students' mental health. This finding contributes to implementing a more structured and scalable intervention model in schools.

Third, a customized approach for adolescents. The novelty of this research is uncovering psychoanalytic counseling principles typically used for adults in the context of adolescent psychological development. This finding presents a counseling model more relevant to high school students' emotional, social, and cognitive needs.

Fourth, the development of practical psychoanalytic counseling methods. The novelty of this research reveals the importance of designing psychoanalytic counseling methods that are more practical and efficient and within the time and resource constraints in schools. This finding contributes to bridging the gap between complex psychoanalytic theories and practical needs in the field.

The application of psychoanalytic counseling to reduce self-injury behavior among high school students has great potential. With its in-depth approach, focusing on emotion management, self-awareness, and trauma healing, psychoanalytic counseling allows students to understand the root causes of their behavior and develop skills to cope with emotional issues in a healthier manner. With proper support and integration into the school system, psychoanalytic counseling can play an important role in reducing self-injury behavior among adolescents. Psychoanalytic counseling focuses on a deep understanding of unconscious conflicts and childhood experiences

that may underlie self-injury behaviors. Research shows that self-injury is often related to unresolved emotional trauma, which can be obtained through a psychoanalytic approach that delves into students' past experiences. Students who receive psychoanalytic counseling can begin to understand and identify the emotional root causes of their behavior, thus opening up opportunities for more holistic healing.

The findings of this study contribute novelty in adapting the psychoanalytic approach to an educational context, focus on high school students with self-injury, and offer an in-depth perspective rarely discussed in previous studies. This broadens the application horizon of psychoanalysis and enriches intervention efforts toward adolescent mental health. A psychoanalytic approach designed to be relevant and acceptable to adolescents is innovative, given that this age often finds it difficult to engage in in-depth therapeutic methods.

## 4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

### 4.1 Research Implications

This study provides important insights for school counselors on the effectiveness of psychoanalytic approaches in addressing self-injury behaviors. Counselors can integrate psychoanalytic techniques, such as exploration of past trauma and unconscious conflict, into counseling sessions to help students overcome destructive behaviors. The results of this study may encourage schools to include psychoanalysis-based mental health services in student support programs. It also reinforces the importance of training school counselors in deep therapeutic approaches.

### 4.2 Research Contribution

This study extends the literature regarding the use of psychoanalysis in educational contexts, specifically to address adolescent self-injury behavior. It enriches the theoretical and practical bases in developmental and counseling psychology. The findings of this study serve as a basis for schools to emphasize the importance of mental health support further. It may also influence the development of a mental health-based curriculum in secondary schools.

## 5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

### 5.1 Research Limitations

Although the results of the study show the effectiveness of psychoanalytic counseling, there are some limitations:

- (1) Limited sample: The study was conducted on students in one school, so the results may not necessarily be generalized to a wider population.

- (2) Duration of intervention: Limited counseling sessions may not be enough to handle complex cases of self-injury.
- (3) Subjectivity: The effectiveness of counseling depends on the student's openness in the counseling process, which may vary between individuals.

#### 4.2 Recommendations for Future Research Directions

Based on the results of this study, some recommendations that can be given are:

- (1) Further research with a larger sample and various contexts, such as schools with different social backgrounds.
- (2) Develop a more structured counseling program that integrates psychoanalysis with other approaches, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT).
- (3) Counselors should be trained to master psychoanalytic techniques in supporting students with self-injury habits.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Psychoanalytic counseling is effective in reducing self-injury behavior in high school students. After the intervention, the significant decrease in self-injury scores indicates that psychoanalytic counseling can help students understand and overcome the emotional conflicts underlying the behavior. In addition, qualitative findings showed that students who participated in psychoanalytic counseling experienced increased self-awareness and the use of more adaptive coping mechanisms in dealing with stress and negative emotions. This suggests that psychoanalytic counseling effectively reduces self-injury behavior and improves students' overall psychological well-being. Therefore, psychoanalytic counseling can be an effective approach to dealing with self-injury problems in students, especially high school students. The implementation of psychoanalytic counseling in schools can help students overcome the emotional and psychological problems underlying self-injury behaviors, thus supporting their mental health and well-being.

Schools can integrate psychoanalytic counseling as part of the guidance and counseling program to help students who experience self-injury behavior. This approach can help students understand and resolve the emotional conflicts underlying the behavior. Counselor Training: School counselors need to be provided with specialized training in psychoanalytic counseling techniques to increase the effectiveness of interventions. This training could include an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of self-injury behavior and skills in applying psychoanalytic techniques.

It is recommended that psychoanalytic counseling be integrated into school counseling programs, especially at the high school level. Further training of school counselors

in the psychoanalytic approach, as well as counseling students and parents on the importance of in-depth psychological support, may help reduce the prevalence of self-injury behavior and improve the overall mental health of adolescents.

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## CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

All authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript. PU: Conceptualization, Writing – Original Draft and Methodology. JH: Writing - Review & Editing

## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. Prio Utomo is an Editor in Chief for this journal and was not involved in the editorial review or the decision to publish this article.

## Ethical Approval Statement

The author declares that this study was conducted in accordance with research ethics principles and has received ethical approval from the author's institution, including respect for participants' autonomy, confidentiality of data, and ensuring their safety and well-being, as outlined in the applicable research ethics guidelines.

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