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


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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Effectiveness of Cognitive Therapy Training Package based on Mindfulness on Social Comparison and Emotional Self-Regulation of Students Addicted to the Internet

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction:

The internet has facilitated significant societal advancements, offering substantial benefits in education, leisure, and information transfer. However, excessive internet use is often associated with adverse health outcomes, including physical and emotional distress such as anxiety, depression, and the risk of addiction. Adolescents represent a high-risk population for internet

addiction. Over the past two decades, the widespread use of the internet among children and adolescents has underscored the consistently reported negative relationship between addictive online behaviors and both physical and psychological well-being. Social media platforms frequently promote “idealized” images, which can lead to unhealthy social comparisons. Such images may foster unrealistic expectations regarding appearance and behavior. Engaging in comparisons - whether with individuals perceived as superior or inferior - can substantially influence self-perception and emotional states.

Research indicates a logical relationship between self-regulation and addictive behaviors, with emotional self-regulation serving as a critical psychological variable that influences both tendencies toward internet addiction and patterns of self-disclosure in virtual networks. Studies confirm the link between self-regulation and smartphone addiction and emphasize the importance of educating students about their smartphone usage habits. Furthermore, mindfulness-based interventions have been shown to reduce internet addiction and its associated dimensions, including excessive time spent online, psychological dependence, neglect of social and academic responsibilities, and impaired daily functioning. Mindfulness enhances present-moment awareness, encouraging individuals to reflect on ongoing experiences and respond more adaptively to challenges.

One short-term therapeutic approach suitable for adolescents is mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). MBCT integrates Kabat-Zinn's (2003) mindfulness-based stress reduction model with principles of cognitive therapy. By promoting non-judgmental observation and reframing thoughts as mental events rather than facts, MBCT helps individuals adopt a new perspective toward various situations. Research on individuals with internet and online gaming addiction suggests that MBCT techniques enable a realistic and non-judgmental focus on thoughts and bodily sensations, thereby reducing inappropriate reactions to online stimuli—such as anger, tension, anxiety, or loss of control. By strengthening internal coping capacities, MBCT can decrease dependency on the internet and mitigate its negative consequences.

Given concerns regarding adolescent internet addiction and its associations with social comparison and emotional self-regulation, this study examines the effect of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy on social comparison and emotional self-regulation among students with internet addiction.

Methods

The study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test–post-test control group. The statistical population consisted of all students with internet addiction in second-level secondary schools in Garmeh during the 2022–2023 academic year. A school was selected through convenience sampling, and Young's Internet Addiction Test was administered to students. Thirty students with the highest addiction scores were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. In the pre-test phase, the Gibbons and Buunk (1999) Social Comparison Questionnaire and the Hoffman and Kashdan (2010) Emotional Self-Regulation Questionnaire were administered. Following the implementation of the mindfulness-based intervention, social comparison and emotional self-regulation were assessed again in the post-test phase.

Findings

Data were analyzed using multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) in SPSS software. The results indicated a significant difference in social comparison and emotional self-regulation

between the experimental and control groups. The experimental group showed a significant reduction in social comparison scores in the post-test compared to the control group (38.85 versus 45.55). Thus, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy was effective in reducing social comparison among students with internet addiction. Additionally, the experimental group demonstrated a significant increase in emotional self-regulation scores compared to the control group (68.44 versus 61.03). Therefore, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy also effectively enhanced emotional self-regulation in internet-addicted students.

Conclusions

Among the cognitive and emotional benefits of mindfulness - particularly for youth and adolescents - are improvements in attentional outcomes (e.g., focus and working memory) and emotional outcomes (e.g., reduction in rumination, a mechanism linked to social comparison and envy). These improvements can help mitigate the negative effects of social comparison while strengthening attention and memory.

From a behavioral theory perspective, one reason individuals engage excessively with the internet is the immediate reward it offers, providing an escape from daily challenges. This reward cycle reinforces compulsive online behavior. A core principle of mindfulness involves developing a new relationship with one's experiences. Through mindfulness practice, individuals learn to recognize thoughts as transient mental events rather than objective realities. This process of "decentering" helps reduce over-identification with thought content, thereby decreasing excessive internet use and the associated tendency for social comparison.

Based on the study findings, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy significantly affects social comparison in students with internet dependency, reducing both the frequency and impact of such comparisons.

Regarding the second hypothesis, a fundamental aspect of emotional regulation involves recognizing internal feelings, maintaining situational awareness, and fostering empathetic connections with others. Through MBCT practices - such as meditation and body scanning - individuals learn to attend more closely to bodily sensations and to understand the interconnections between thoughts, physical feelings, and emotions, all of which are recognized as continually changing. Techniques like mindful breathing and walking anchor awareness in the present moment, while exercises such as "thoughts are not facts" help individuals differentiate between experiences and their interpretations.

Within the framework of acceptance and letting go, individuals learn that acceptance does not imply passive resignation but rather a clear understanding of events as they are. Letting go involves allowing experiences to exist without attempting to forcefully alter them, thereby cultivating non-attachment. This stance of open awareness supports mental and emotional well-being.

In line with the second finding, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy significantly enhances emotional self-regulation in students with internet dependency, improving their capacity to manage emotions effectively.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors.

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Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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