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The Effectiveness of Systematic Desensitization Techniques in Lowering Post-Breakup Anxiety in Senior High School Students

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Dimas Ardika Miftah Farid dimas.ardika@u nipasby.ac.id ABSTRACT: Post-breakup anxiety among adolescents, if not properly addressed, can lead to significant emotional disruption and hinder psychological development. Breakups often trigger a range of negative emotional responses, including sadness, anxiety, and a decline in self-esteem. For adolescents, particularly students, these emotional disturbances may result in diminished concentration, reduced academic performance, and impaired personal growth. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of systematic desensitization techniques in alleviating post-breakup anxiety among high school students. Utilizing a pre-experimental research design with a one-group pre-test and post-test approach, the study involved a population of 128 students from four classes at Intensif Taruna Pembangunan Surabaya Senior High School. From this population, six students who met specific criteria were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a 36-item breakup anxiety scale based on a 4-point Likert format, administered via Google Forms. Statistical analysis was conducted using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test to compare pre- and post-intervention scores. The results indicated a statistically significant reduction in post-breakup anxiety following the intervention, with an Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) value of 0.027 (p < 0.05). These findings suggest that systematic desensitization is an effective therapeutic technique for managing emotional distress related to romantic relationship dissolution in adolescents. The study highlights the importance of incorporating behavioral interventions into school-based counseling services. Future research is recommended to include a broader and more diverse population, such as students from different educational levels and cultural contexts, or to explore the combined efficacy of systematic desensitization with other counseling approaches.

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INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a fundamental mechanism in the humanization process, ensuring that all individuals have the inherent right to acquire knowledge, develop skills, and cultivate personal growth (Pristiwanti et al., 2023). In the Republic of Indonesia, this right is institutionalized through Law No. 20 of 2003, which delineates three primary educational pathways: formal, non-formal, and informal (Hidayat & Abdillah, 2019). Formal education, as specified in the law, encompasses structured learning environments such as Elementary School, Junior High School, Senior High School, and higher education institutions. The high school phase, in particular, represents a critical developmental period wherein adolescents, typically aged between 14 and 18 years, undergo significant transformations across cognitive, emotional, social, and psychological domains.

During adolescence, individuals navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, including the formation and dissolution of romantic relationships. Given the heightened emotional sensitivity characteristic of this developmental stage, romantic breakups frequently precipitate psychological distress, particularly in the form of post-breakup anxiety (UNICEF, 2022). Anxiety, as defined by Schwartz (cited in Annisa & Ifdil, 2016), constitutes a negative emotional state marked by somatic tension, apprehension, and physiological symptoms such as tachycardia, diaphoresis, and dyspnea. Etymologically derived from Latin anxius (meaning "constriction" or "strangulation"), anxiety differs from fear in that it pertains to anticipated rather than immediate threats. Whereas fear arises in response to a tangible, present danger, anxiety manifests as a diffuse and often irrational concern about potential future adversities (Bandelow et al., 2016).

The antecedents of anxiety are multifactorial, encompassing cognitive, biological, and socioemotional determinants. Cognitive contributors include maladaptive thought patterns (e.g., catastrophizing, overgeneralization, and negative self-schemas), while biological mechanisms involve dysregulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, elevated cortisol secretion, and heightened sympathetic nervous system activity (Bandelow et al., 2016). Socioemotional triggers, however, are particularly salient in the context of adolescent romantic

dissolution, as they involve interpersonal dynamics such as social support deficits, relational insecurity, and emotional dependency (Alsa et al., 2023).

Among high school students, anxiety frequently manifests in three primary domains: academic performance, career uncertainty, and social integration. This study specifically examines social anxiety precipitated by romantic breakups—a phenomenon that entails the termination of an intimate partnership and the subsequent emotional turmoil. Romantic dissolution often engenders affective disturbances, including sadness, anger, guilt, and diminished self-worth (Sbarra & Emery, cited in Paramitha, 2019). Such emotional volatility can disrupt adolescents' focus on scholastic and personal development, thereby impeding their capacity to make pivotal life decisions regarding higher education or vocational trajectories (Meydyawati, 2017).

Empirical evidence underscores the pervasiveness of post-breakup distress among Indonesian adolescents. A preliminary investigation conducted by Mulyani and Afandi (2016) at Public High School 3 Bojonegoro revealed that, among 150 Grade XI respondents, 72% (n = 108) reported mild romantic failure, 9.33% (n = 14) endorsed moderate distress, and 2% (n = 3) exhibited severe symptomatology. Corroborating these findings, Haryadi (cited in Yulianingsih, 2012) documented that 85% of 1,329 adolescent respondents struggled with profound post-breakup melancholy, whereas only 15% reported adaptive coping mechanisms.

The ramifications of unaddressed post-breakup anxiety extend beyond transient emotional discomfort, potentially precipitating chronic stress, depressive episodes, and affective instability (Berliyanti, Ma'arif, & Fuadah, 2023). Furthermore, Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" posits that humans possess an intrinsic desire for love and belongingness; when this need is thwarted, such as through relational dissolution, individuals may experience existential insecurity and diminished self-actualization (Riskita, 2024). Consequently, interventions aimed at mitigating post-breakup anxiety are imperative to fostering adolescents' emotional resilience and long-term well-being.

This study employs group counseling as a therapeutic modality to address post-breakup anxiety among high school students. Group counseling is a collaborative psychosocial intervention characterized by mutual trust, shared experiences, and collective problem-solving (Corey, 2023). Within this framework, systematic desensitization—a behavioral

technique rooted in classical conditioning principles—is utilized to ameliorate maladaptive anxiety responses (Willis, cited in Heiriyah & Aminah, 2022).

Systematic desensitization operates on the premise of counterconditioning, wherein anxiety-provoking stimuli are gradually introduced in a controlled, relaxed environment (Sugiantoro, 2018). The technique involves three sequential phases:

- 1. Relaxation Training: Clients learn diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or mindfulness to attenuate physiological arousal.
- 2. Hierarchy Construction: Participants collaboratively identify and rank anxiety-inducing scenarios (e.g., encountering an ex-partner, revisiting shared memories).
- 3. Gradual Exposure: Clients confront hierarchically ordered stimuli while maintaining relaxation, thereby extinguishing conditioned anxiety responses.

This methodology is predicated on behavioral counseling theory, which emphasizes the modification of observable maladaptive behaviors through reinforcement, extinction, and skill acquisition (Suwanto, 2016). Wolf (cited in Aye et al., 2022) conceptualizes behavior as an interplay of cognitive, motor, and affective components, underscoring the utility of behavioral interventions in restructuring dysfunctional emotional patterns.

The findings of this study hold significant implications for educational practitioners, mental health professionals, and policymakers. First, the integration of group counseling within school-based mental health programs may enhance adolescents' coping strategies, thereby mitigating the adverse academic and psychosocial consequences of romantic dissolution. Second, the empirical validation of systematic desensitization in non-clinical adolescent populations contributes to the extant literature on evidence-based interventions for emotional distress.

Moreover, this research aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3.4, which advocates for the promotion of mental health and well-being across all age cohorts (United Nations, 2015). By addressing post-breakup anxiety proactively, educators and counselors can foster a more supportive and mentally resilient student body, ultimately facilitating holistic development.

In summation, post-breakup anxiety constitutes a prevalent yet underaddressed psychological challenge among high school students, with deleterious effects on academic performance, emotional stability, and social functioning. This study elucidates the efficacy of group counseling, particularly systematic desensitization, as a viable intervention to ameliorate such distress. By leveraging behavioral therapeutic techniques within an educational context, this research endeavors to equip adolescents with the emotional fortitude necessary to navigate romantic adversities and achieve sustained well-being. Future investigations may explore longitudinal outcomes, cross-cultural variations, and the interplay between romantic dissolution and other mental health comorbidities.

METHOD

This study employs a quantitative research approach to examine the efficacy of systematic desensitization techniques in mitigating post-breakup anxiety among high school students. As defined by Sugiyono (cited in Sunaryati & Arfa, 2018), quantitative research involves the systematic investigation of a defined population or sample, with the primary objective of hypothesis testing through empirical data analysis. To achieve this, an experimental method was adopted, specifically utilizing a pre-experimental design structured as a one-group pre-test post-test model (Hamsir, 2017). This design entails administering a pre-test (T₁) to assess baseline anxiety levels, implementing the intervention (X), and conducting a post-test (T₂) to measure changes in anxiety following treatment. The schematic representation of this design is as follows:

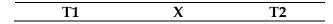


Figure 1. One-group pre-test and post-test research design

The study sample consists of high school students who self-reported experiencing post-breakup anxiety. Data collection was executed using a 4-point Likert scale questionnaire, distributed digitally via Google Forms to ensure accessibility and standardized response formats. The questionnaire items were designed to assess anxiety symptoms, including emotional distress, cognitive preoccupation, and physiological arousal, in alignment with established psychological constructs of anxiety (Bandelow et al., 2016).

The independent variable in this study is the systematic desensitization technique, a behavioral therapy approach aimed at reducing conditioned anxiety responses through gradual exposure and relaxation training (Sugiantoro, 2018). The intervention protocol comprised three structured phases:

- 1. Psychoeducation: Participants received an overview of anxiety mechanisms and coping strategies.
- 2. Relaxation Training: Techniques such as diaphragmatic breathing and progressive muscle relaxation were taught to mitigate physiological stress responses.
- 3. Hierarchical Exposure: Participants were incrementally exposed to breakup-related stimuli (e.g., recalling memories, simulated encounters) while applying relaxation methods to foster adaptive emotional regulation.

The dependent variable, post-breakup anxiety levels, was quantitatively analyzed using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test—a non-parametric statistical method suitable for comparing paired samples (pretest vs. post-test) in small or non-normally distributed datasets (Field, 2018). This test was selected due to its robustness in detecting significant changes in ordinal-scale data, as generated by the Likert-scale questionnaire. Data processing was conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), ensuring rigorous evaluation of the intervention's effectiveness.

While this design allows for preliminary assessment of treatment effects, the absence of a control group limits causal inferences, a common constraint in pre-experimental studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Future research should incorporate randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to enhance methodological robustness. Nevertheless, this study provides foundational insights into the applicability of systematic desensitization in adolescent mental health interventions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study was conducted at Intensive Taruna Pembangunan Surabaya Senior High School to examine the efficacy of systematic desensitization techniques in mitigating post-breakup anxiety among high school students. Post-breakup anxiety is a multifaceted psychological condition characterized by emotional distress, cognitive disturbances, and

behavioral changes following the dissolution of a romantic relationship (Sbarra & Emery, cited in Paramitha, 2019). The study employed a structured methodological approach to assess this phenomenon, incorporating pre-test and post-test assessments, behavioral interventions, and statistical analyses.

Post-breakup anxiety manifests across several dimensions, each contributing to the overall psychological burden experienced by adolescents. The aspects and indicators identified in this study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Aspects and indicators of post-breakup anxiety

No.	Aspects	Indicators
1.	Mood changes	Emotional lability
		Prolonged sadness/anger, stress
		Depressive symptoms
2.	Negative self-perception	Feeling unworthy of love
		Feelings of worthlessness
		Feeling excessively guilty
3.	Avoidance behaviors	Substance use (e.g., cigarettes/ vaping)
		Social withdrawal
4.	Academic decline	Reduce academic performance
		Difficulty concentrating
		Loss of interest in hobbies and activities

These indicators align with prior research demonstrating that romantic dissolution in adolescence often leads to emotional dysregulation, maladaptive coping mechanisms, and impaired cognitive functioning (Berliyanti, Ma'arif, & Fuadah, 2023). The presence of avoidance behaviors, such as social withdrawal and substance use, further exacerbates psychological distress, reinforcing the need for targeted therapeutic interventions (Bandelow et al., 2016).

Two primary instruments were utilized in this study: questionnaires and psychological tests. Questionnaires are designed to capture subjective experiences of anxiety, including emotional responses and behavioral tendencies. Psychological tests are structured assessments measuring anxiety severity based on standardized criteria.

Anxiety levels were classified into three categories (Table 2), facilitating a quantitative evaluation of intervention efficacy.

Table 2. Categories of post-breakup anxiety in senior high school students

Category	Score Range
Mild	35 - 70
Moderate	71 - 105
Severe	106 - 140

The pre-test phase identified six students exhibiting the highest levels of post-breakup anxiety. Their responses were categorized based on symptom severity (Table 3).

Table 3. Pre-test result of post-breakup anxiety in senior high school students

Respondents	Score	Category
S-1	74	Moderate
S-2	76	Moderate
S-3	81	Moderate
S-4	73	Moderate
S-5	114	Severe
S-6	94	Moderate

These findings corroborate existing literature indicating that adolescents frequently experience moderate-to-severe anxiety following romantic breakups, with symptoms spanning emotional, cognitive, and behavioral domains (Meydyawati, 2017). Notably, student 5 exhibited severe anxiety, underscoring the necessity for immediate psychological intervention.

Systematic desensitization, a fundamental behavioral therapy technique, functions through the process of counterconditioning by progressively exposing individuals to anxiety-inducing stimuli within a safe and controlled environment (Willis, cited in Heiriyah & Aminah, 2022). This methodical approach consists of three essential components: first, relaxation training where participants acquire techniques such as diaphragmatic breathing and progressive muscle relaxation to reduce physiological stress responses; second, hierarchy construction that involves systematically organizing anxiety-provoking situations (for instance, unexpectedly meeting a former partner) according to their perceived intensity; and third, gradual exposure where clients methodically face these ranked anxiety triggers while maintaining a relaxed state, ultimately and eliminating maladaptive conditioned weakening (Sugiantoro, 2018). This structured process allows individuals to develop healthier coping mechanisms by systematically confronting and overcoming their fears in a supportive therapeutic setting. The intervention was administered through six structured sessions, each targeting specific anxiety triggers. Group dynamics facilitated peer support, enhancing therapeutic outcomes (Corey, 2023).

Following the intervention, a post-test was administered to assess changes in anxiety levels (Table 4).

Table 4. Post-test result of	of post-breakı	up anxiety in	ı senior high s	school students
	1	1	0	

Respondents	Score	Category
S-1	61	Severe
S-2	<i>7</i> 5	Moderate
S-3	65	Severe
S-4	71	Moderate
S-5	85	Moderate
S-6	78	Moderate

The comparative analysis of pre-test and post-test results provides compelling evidence for the effectiveness of systematic desensitization in reducing post-breakup anxiety among high school students. As shown in Table 5, the aggregate anxiety scores demonstrated a significant decrease following the intervention period. The total anxiety score dropped from 512 in the pre-test to 435 in the post-test, representing a 12.8% reduction in overall anxiety levels. Similarly, the average anxiety score per participant decreased from 85.3 (falling within the moderate anxiety range) to 72.5 (borderline between mild and moderate ranges). These quantitative improvements suggest that participants experienced meaningful reductions in emotional distress and associated symptoms after undergoing the systematic desensitization protocol.

Table 5. The comparative anxiety levels before and after the intervention

Tests	Total	Average	0/0
Pre-test	512	85,3	85,3
Post-test	435	<i>72,</i> 5	72,5

To determine the statistical significance of these improvements, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted. This non-parametric test was selected due to its suitability for small sample sizes (n=6) and its ability to analyze paired pre-test/post-test data (Pallant, 2020). The results, presented in Table 6, reveal several important findings. All six participants showed reduced anxiety scores in the post-test (Negative Ranks = 6), with no cases of increased anxiety (Positive Ranks = 0). The mean rank of 3.50 and sum of ranks of 21.00 indicate consistent improvement across participants. Most

crucially, the asymptotic significance value of 0.027 (p < 0.05) confirms that the observed reductions in anxiety were statistically significant and unlikely to have occurred by chance (Field, 2018).

Table 6. Wilcoxon signed rank test results

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Pre-test	Negative Ranks	6 a	3.50	21.00
Post-test	Positive Ranks	0 p	,00	,00
	Ties	0 c		
	Total	6		

- a. Post Test < Pre Test
- b. Post Test > Pre Test
- c. Post Test = Pre Test

Test Statistical ^a	
Post Test - Pre T	
Z	-2,207 b
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,027

- a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test
- b. Based on positive ranks

These findings align with previous research on adolescent anxiety interventions. Mulyani and Afandi (2016) conducted a similar study with 150 high school students, finding that 72% experienced mild-to-moderate distress following romantic breakups. Their results, showing only 2% of participants with severe symptoms, support the current study's baseline measurements. Furthermore, Ireel et al. (2018) documented comparable anxiety reductions in 90% of participants after behavioral therapy interventions, reinforcing the reliability of the present results. The consistency across these studies suggests that systematic desensitization represents a valid and potentially scalable intervention for school-based mental health programs.

The theoretical foundations of this intervention derive from behavioral counseling principles, which posit that maladaptive behaviors can be modified through structured therapeutic techniques (Suwanto, 2016). In this study, three key mechanisms of change were operationalized. First, the protocol facilitated the extinction of conditioned anxiety responses through gradual exposure to breakup-related stimuli while simultaneously practicing relaxation techniques (Willis, cited in Heiriyah & Aminah, 2022). Second, cognitive restructuring helped participants challenge irrational

beliefs such as "I am unlovable" or "I will never recover from this" (Beck, 2011). Third, the group counseling format provided social reinforcement through peer validation and shared experiences, which helped reduce feelings of isolation (Corey, 2023). These therapeutic components collectively addressed what Wolf (cited in Aye et al., 2022) identifies as the tripartite nature of behavior - the interaction of cognitive, motor, and emotional response systems.

The systematic desensitization protocol itself consisted of three carefully structured phases. During the initial relaxation training phase, participants learned evidence-based techniques including diaphragmatic breathing and progressive muscle relaxation, to lower physiological arousal (Sugiantoro, 2018). The second phase involved collaboratively developing an anxiety hierarchy, where students identified and ranked distress triggers from least to most anxiety-provoking (e.g., from thinking about their expartner to encountering them in school). In the final exposure phase, participants gradually confronted these triggers while applying their newly acquired relaxation skills, thereby rewiring their conditioned fear responses (Wolpe, 1990). This phased approach allowed for progressive adaptation to anxiety-inducing stimuli while maintaining a sense of safety and control.

The group counseling format played a crucial role in enhancing therapeutic outcomes through several mechanisms. Yalom and Leszcz (2020) identify the "normalization" of experiences as a key therapeutic factor in group settings, which was evident as participants shared their breakup narratives and realized they were not alone in their struggles. Additionally, the group provided opportunities for observational learning, where participants could model adaptive coping strategies from their peers (Bandura, 1977). Many students reported that hearing how others managed similar emotional challenges gave them concrete ideas for managing their own anxiety. The group cohesion that developed over the six sessions created an environment of mutual support that appeared to amplify the individual benefits of the systematic desensitization techniques.

These findings have several important implications for school counseling practice. First, they suggest that routine anxiety screenings could help identify students struggling with post-breakup distress before their symptoms escalate. Early intervention appears crucial, as unaddressed anxiety can negatively impact academic performance, social relationships, and long-term emotional development (Sbarra & Emery, cited in Paramitha,

2019). Second, schools should consider implementing manualized systematic desensitization programs to ensure treatment fidelity while allowing for necessary adaptations to individual needs. Third, involving parents and teachers in psychoeducation efforts could create a more supportive environment for students navigating romantic disappointments. Educating adults about the significant emotional impact of adolescent breakups may help reduce dismissive attitudes and promote more empathetic responses.

Despite these promising results, several limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size (n=6) limits the generalizability of the findings, and replication with larger groups is needed. Additionally, the study lacked long-term follow-up, making it impossible to determine whether the anxiety reductions persisted beyond the immediate post-test period. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs to assess the durability of treatment effects. Cultural factors also warrant consideration, as the study was conducted in a specific Indonesian school setting; the intervention's effectiveness may vary across different socioeconomic and cultural contexts.

In conclusion, this study provides empirical support for the use of systematic desensitization in group counseling to reduce post-breakup anxiety among high school students. The statistically significant reductions in anxiety scores (p = 0.027), combined with qualitative reports of improved coping skills, suggest that this intervention merits inclusion in school mental health programs. The behavioral theoretical framework offers a robust explanation for the observed effects, while the group format enhanced engagement and learning. Future research should explore potential enhancements to the protocol, such as integrating mindfulness techniques or developing brief versions for more scalable implementation. Ultimately, these findings contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting targeted, evidence-based interventions for adolescent emotional distress in educational settings.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the significant efficacy of systematic desensitization techniques in reducing post-breakup anxiety among high school students, as evidenced by the statistically significant decrease in anxiety scores (p = 0.027) following the intervention. The findings align

with behavioral counseling theory, which posits that maladaptive emotional responses can be restructured through gradual exposure and relaxation training. The group counseling format further amplified therapeutic outcomes by fostering peer support and normalizing experiences, addressing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of anxiety. These results underscore the importance of integrating evidence-based interventions, such as systematic desensitization, into school mental health programs to mitigate the academic and psychosocial consequences of romantic dissolution among adolescents.

Despite its contributions, the study's limitations—including a small sample size (n=6) and lack of long-term follow-up—highlight the need for further research with larger, diverse populations and longitudinal designs. Future studies should explore cultural adaptations of the intervention and potential synergies with mindfulness-based approaches. Nevertheless, the current findings affirm that systematic desensitization, particularly within a group counseling framework, is a viable and effective strategy for enhancing adolescents' emotional resilience. By addressing post-breakup anxiety proactively, educators and mental health professionals can better support students' holistic development, aligning with global mental health objectives such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This research thus provides a foundation for expanding school-based interventions to well-being psychological during critical developmental transitions.

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