

# IMPROVING ADOLESCENT SELF-ESTEEM WITH COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL GROUP COUNSELING: THE ROLE OF COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING

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## Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of cognitive restructuring within cognitive behavioral group counseling in improving self-esteem among junior high school students. The research was motivated by the prevalence of low self-esteem among eighth-grade students in Malang City, Indonesia, which negatively impacts psychosocial and academic development. A pretest–posttest control group design was employed, involving 10 purposively selected students divided into experimental and control groups. The experimental group participated in six group counseling sessions incorporating cognitive restructuring techniques. Self-esteem was measured using an instrument based on Mruk's (2006) theory, which demonstrated adequate validity and reliability ( $\alpha = 0.780$ ). Data were analyzed using a paired-sample t-test. Results indicated a significant difference between the posttest scores of the experimental and control groups ( $p = 0.019 < 0.05$ ), suggesting that cognitive restructuring in cognitive behavioral group counseling effectively enhances students' self-esteem. These findings provide practical implications for school counseling services, highlighting cognitive restructuring as a valuable strategy for fostering positive self-concept and psychosocial adjustment among adolescents.

**Keywords:** cognitive restructuring; group counseling; self-esteem;

## 1. Introduction

Adolescence is a developmental phase often described as a period of "identity crisis," marked by heightened sensitivity to social evaluation and a strong desire for autonomy (Febi et al., 2022). During this phase, individuals tend to compare themselves to idealized figures, shaping their sense of self-worth. This evaluative process of perceiving oneself positively or negatively is referred to as self-esteem.

Self-esteem can be simply defined as an individual's affective-cognitive evaluation of their own worth, encompassing whether they perceive themselves as valuable or not. According to Kapıkıran and Özgüngör (2020), self-esteem consists of two primary components: competence, which reflects one's confidence in performing tasks effectively, and worthiness, which refers to the perception of being loved and appreciated. For adolescents, self-esteem serves as a crucial psychological construct that not only functions as an indicator of personal well-being but also plays an essential role in coping with social pressures and mitigating risks of maladaptive behaviors. Although self-esteem is generally stable, adolescence represents a critical period in which it tends to decline, particularly during early adolescence, the stage typically corresponding to middle school years. Research by Białocka This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Pikul et al. (2019) indicates that this decline often manifests in domains related to social acceptance and academic achievement. Low self-esteem in adolescents commonly affected by their psychosocial factors and suboptimal developmental experiences.

A growing body of literature demonstrates that low self-esteem is significantly associated with various risk behaviors among adolescents. Martínez-Casanova et al. (2024) report a negative correlation between self-esteem and high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse, self-harm, sexual misconduct, psychological disorders, and aggressive acts, including bullying and cyberbullying. Additionally, adolescents with low self-esteem often experience discomfort in social settings, leading to avoidance behaviors that impair social interaction and may hinder academic, social, and emotional development (Tria Febrina et al., 2018; Mujiati & Kurniawati,

2024; Refnadi, 2018). Conversely, those with high self-esteem tend to feel content with themselves, appreciate their potential, and exhibit strong initiative for personal growth.

Preliminary findings at a Junior High School in Malang City, Indonesia, underscore this issue. The observations results revealed that eighth-grade students appeared passive and lacked confidence, with one or two students in each class withdrawing from social interactions. Furthermore, based on the interviews results, the school counselors indicated eighth-grade students were noticeably less active than the seventh and ninth grade. Self-esteem measurements further confirmed this concern as 23.8% of students had the low self-esteem, the other 71.4% at a moderate level, and only 4.8% demonstrated high self-esteem. These statistics suggest that the majority of eighth-grade students possess moderate to low self-esteem, with less than 5% had high self-esteem. This condition implied the need for responsive, systematic interventions through school counseling services to support students in developing or enhancing self-esteem. Without timely intervention, these students risk failing to achieve essential developmental tasks effectively.

To address this challenge, school counselors can implement various evidence-based approaches, one of which is cognitive-behavioral counseling. Cognitive-behavioral (CB) approaches aim to identify and modify maladaptive thought patterns and behaviors underlying psychological difficulties, including low self-esteem. Within the CB framework, one technique considered particularly effective and relevant for addressing low self-esteem is cognitive restructuring. This technique assists individuals in identifying core beliefs, cognitive distortions, and the interconnection between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Beck & Fleming, 2021; Corey, 2024).

From the CB perspective, low self-esteem is often rooted in three cognitive levels: negative core beliefs about the self, others, and the world; dysfunctional assumptions and rules developed as protective mechanisms (intermediate beliefs); and automatic negative thoughts that reinforce feelings of worthlessness (Rani et al., 2022). Cognitive restructuring is designed to challenge and replace these maladaptive cognitions with more adaptive, reality-based alternatives. By restructuring negative thinking patterns, individuals can develop a more positive self-view and restore their sense of competence and worthiness.

Beyond individual counseling, delivering these techniques through group counseling offers additional benefits. Group counseling provides a supportive environment that promotes interpersonal learning, social reinforcement, and shared experiences. According to M. Chen and Rybak (2017), group dynamics facilitate the exploration and modification of maladaptive thought patterns through peer feedback and social modeling. Within a cohesive group setting, adolescents can engage in mutual sharing, receive constructive feedback, and reflect on their cognitive and emotional responses. This process accelerates cognitive restructuring while offering social support essential for psychological growth. Through these interactions, students not only reconstruct negative self-perceptions but also strengthen their confidence and social skills in a safe, structured context.

Integrating cognitive restructuring techniques within cognitive-behavioral group counseling is therefore considered an effective and practical intervention for improving self-esteem among adolescents. This approach not only targets maladaptive cognitions but also leverages group processes to enhance emotional resilience, self-awareness, and interpersonal competence. Such an intervention aligns with the developmental needs of adolescents and supports their ability to navigate psychosocial challenges more effectively.

Based on the theoretical and empirical considerations outlined above, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of cognitive restructuring in cognitive-behavioral group counseling in improving self-esteem among eighth-grade students in Malang City, Indonesia. This research seeks to contribute to the evidence base for school counseling practices and provide actionable insights for counselors to implement structured, impactful strategies to foster adolescent well-being. Accordingly, the hypothesis of this study is that students who receive cognitive-behavioral group counseling with cognitive restructuring will demonstrate a significantly higher level of self-esteem compared to those who do not receive the intervention.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Research Design

This study employed a pretest–posttest control group design, involving two groups: an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group received treatment using cognitive-behavioral group counseling with the cognitive restructuring technique, while the control group did not receive the same intervention during the research period. This design was selected because it offers high internal validity and allows the researcher to objectively and accurately assess the effect of the intervention (Sugiyono, 2017).

### 2.2 Participants

The study involved 10 eighth-grade students selected from a population of 240 students. Participants were chosen using purposive sampling based on the following criteria (1) students with low self-esteem; (2) no severe psychological disorders; and (3) willingness to participate in the intervention series. Participants were divided into two groups as five students in the experimental group and five in the control group. This group size was determined to ensure the formation of group dynamics efficiently and optimally (Sukma, 2018).

### 2.3 Instruments

Data were collected using a Self-Esteem Scale developed based on the two-factor theory of self-esteem by Christopher J. Mruk (2006). The instrument consisted of 32 items (both favorable and unfavorable) covering two indicators: self-worth and self-competence. Validity testing identified six invalid items, while reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.780, indicating acceptable reliability. During data collection, the instrument was administered in paper-based format for the experimental group and via Online Forms for the control group, using a true–false response format for pretest and posttest.

### 2.4 Research Procedure

The experimental group received six sessions of cognitive-behavioral group counseling incorporating cognitive restructuring techniques, with each session lasting approximately 40 minutes. The intervention aimed to enhance students’ self-esteem by addressing maladaptive cognitions and fostering positive self-perceptions. The session plan is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Intervention Design**

Session	Theme/Topic	Activities
1	<i>My Inner Voice: Who’s Talking in My Head?</i>	Introduction to self-esteem concepts; identification of automatic thoughts.
2	<i>Mirror Reflection: Am I Really That Bad?</i>	<i>Thought Detective</i> exercise; recognizing moments of negative thoughts and cognitive distortions.
3	<i>Battle of Thoughts: Challenging My Inner Critic</i>	ABC Model exercise (A: situation, B: negative thought, C: new response); reflection on changes.
4	<i>Build Your Self-Talk Playlist</i>	Writing positive affirmations; sharing personal strengths: “One of my best qualities.”
5	<i>Level Up Yourself, No More Overthinking!</i>	Interest-based challenges; completion of self-monitoring worksheet.
6	<i>Final Battle: The More Confident Me!</i>	Progress reflection; creating a self-esteem recovery kit; writing a letter to future self.

### 2.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed quantitatively using the paired-sample t-test in SPSS version 25 to examine the significance of differences between pretest and posttest scores within each group. Additionally, a paired-sample t-test was applied to compare posttest scores between the experimental and control groups.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Result

The intervention process was carried out in four main stages. First, a pretest was administered to measure students’ self-esteem levels before the intervention. Second, the

intervention was implemented for the experimental group through six sessions of cognitivebehavioral group counseling using the cognitive restructuring technique, with each session lasting 40 minutes. The third stage involved administering the posttest to both the experimental and control groups to identify changes in self-esteem levels after the intervention.

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistic**

		Mean	N	SD
Experiment group	Pre Test	5.00	5	2.345
	Post Test	14.20	5	3.421
Control Group	Pre Test	6.80	5	1.304
	Post Test	7.80	5	1.304

**Table 3. Paired Sample T-test**

		Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control Group	Pre Test-PostTest	-1.000			.034
Post Test (Both)	Experiment-Control	6.400	3.784	4	.019
Experiment Group	Pre Test-Post Test	-9.200	-3.162	4	.001

The results of the inferential analysis using paired-sample t-tests for each group are presented in Table 2 and Table 3. In the experimental group, there was a significant difference between pretest scores (M = 5.00, SD = 2.345) and posttest scores (M = 14.20, SD = 3.421), with  $t(4) = 7.948$ ,  $p = 0.001$ . Since  $p < 0.05$ , this indicates a significant improvement in self-esteem after the students received cognitive restructuring in group counseling.

In contrast, the control group also showed a statistically significant difference between pretest (M = 6.80, SD = 1.304) and posttest (M = 7.80, SD = 1.304) scores, with  $t(4) = 3.162$ ,  $p = 0.034$ . However, the mean difference was only 1 point, suggesting that the improvement was not practically meaningful and was likely due to external factors such as test familiarity or normal classroom learning, rather than a specific intervention.

Further, the independent t-test comparing posttest scores between the experimental and control groups showed a significance value of  $0.019 < 0.05$ , confirming a significant difference in self-esteem levels between students who received cognitive-behavioral group counseling with cognitive restructuring and those who did not.

### 3.2 Discussion

These findings reinforce the core premise of cognitive-behavioral counseling, namely that an individual's thought patterns directly influence their emotions and behaviors (Beck, 2021). Low self-esteem in students does not occur spontaneously; rather, it emerges from recurring negative cognitive schemas that are automatic and deviate from objective reality. Such schemas shape global self-perceptions of being unworthy, incompetent, or unloved. The cognitive restructuring technique systematically helps individuals identify these irrational thoughts, critically evaluate them, and replace them with more rational and adaptive beliefs.

From the counseling sessions in this study, several key factors contributing to low self-esteem among students were identified, consistent with previous research findings: (1) Socioeconomic background, (2) Dysfunctional parenting, (3) Bullying victimization, (4) Uncontrolled social media usage, (5) Unsupportive peer environment, and (6) Rigid teacher-

student relationships. Each of these factors related to various belief that constructed from internal experiences or the belief system of the students environment.

In the Socio-economic factors, Low socio-economic status creates repeated experiences of disadvantage, leading students to interpret their circumstances as a reflection of personal inadequacy (Krisna Rusdiana, 2020). Over time, these experiences reinforce core beliefs that equate self-worth with material status and intermediate beliefs such as conditional rules about acceptance. These distorted interpretations erode global self-esteem because students perceive success and value as unattainable. The

Dysfunctional parenting factors refers to the weak parent-child relationships, neglect, and divorce can hinder basic needs for security and affection, reducing confidence in social interactions (Fatimah et al., 2020; Valencia & Soetikno, 2022; Vicky Alfina, 2021). Inconsistent or neglectful parenting disrupts the formation of secure attachment, fostering core beliefs of being unworthy of love and support. These beliefs generate intermediate assumptions which shape avoidance behaviors and low self-assertion. Such cognitive schemas limit adaptive coping, reinforcing feelings of helplessness and inferiority.

Bullying victimization refers to bullying experience that lowering the self-confidence, induces anxiety and fear, and may lead to social withdrawal or depression (Saragih & Soetikno, 2023). The bullying experiences repeatedly confirm negative social feedback, strengthening core beliefs of being powerless or inferior. This validation of negative self-concepts amplifies intermediate rules that encouraging withdrawal and passivity. Over time, these internalized beliefs maintain a cycle of low confidence and social disengagement.

Uncontrolled social media usage affect the adolescents to expose the unrealistic standards and lifestyles online often internalize negative self-comparisons (Steinsbekk et al., 2021). Exposure to idealized portrayals on social media fosters distorted comparative thinking, leading to core beliefs that self-worth depends on meeting unrealistic external standards. These core beliefs are supported by conditional assumptions, driving maladaptive behaviors like excessive self-monitoring. This process sustains dissatisfaction with self-image and reinforces low self-esteem.

Unsupportive peer environment related to the lack of positive social reinforcement encourages students to interpret social challenges (Ariyanti & Purwoko, 2023) as evidence of inadequacy, solidifying core beliefs of social undesirability. These experiences strengthen intermediate rules that promoting conformity and fear of rejection. This dynamic perpetuates dependence on external approval for self-worth.

Rigid teacher-student relationships related to the pressure at school (X. Chen & Ma, 2023). Authoritarian or overly demanding teacher interactions create chronic performance anxiety, embedding core beliefs of incompetence. These beliefs interact with conditional assumptions that fueling perfectionism and fear of failure. Such rigid schemas undermine confidence and inhibit adaptive learning behaviors.

Most causes of low self-esteem observed in this study originated from repeated external experiences that shaped students' cognitive frameworks during formative years. These experiences contributed to the gradual construction of maladaptive core beliefs, such as global judgments about personal worth, and intermediate beliefs, including rigid assumptions and conditional rules for acceptance (Hanafi et al., 2020). Over time, these cognitive structures became self-reinforcing through selective attention and negative self-appraisal, making them resistant to change. Especially when these cognitive structures had affect their meaning of life (Hanafi et al., 2025). This restructuring process not only altered students' interpretive frameworks but also facilitated the internalization of new schemas that supported healthier self-perceptions and improved behavioral choices (Rosidah et al., 2025).

Consistent with previous research, the results demonstrated that students receiving cognitive restructuring within group counseling experienced significant changes in self-esteem. Assessment using self-esteem indicators of self-worth and self-competence revealed notable improvements. Initially, students entered the sessions with self-doubt and negative self-concepts; by the end, they demonstrated more realistic, positive, and confident attitudes toward their abilities.

It is essential to note that increasing self-esteem should not rely solely on inducing positive feelings without enhancing actual competence. Such an approach risks producing psychologically fragile individuals who fear failure (Kapıkıran & Özgüngör, 2020; Mruk, 2006). This study aligns with McKay and Fanning's (2000) framework, emphasizing that self-esteem is built through accurate internal evaluations of personal thoughts and deliberate, compassionate responses to them. During counseling sessions, students learned that many of their long-held negative beliefs were unfounded and hindered personal growth. Altering these beliefs resulted in significant improvements in emotional well-being, self-confidence, and interpersonal relationships.

Moreover, implementing cognitive restructuring in a group counseling setting added substantial psychosocial benefits. Group dynamics enabled students to not only practice identifying and restructuring negative thoughts but also experience corrective emotional interactions through peer feedback, recognition, and social support (M. Chen & Rybak, 2017; Zabel et al., 2022). Participation in a supportive group helped students realize they were not alone in their struggles, normalized their experiences, and fostered a sense of belonging. The shift from feeling "unworthy and isolated" to "accepted and connected" was a therapeutic effect that reinforced the intervention's overall effectiveness.

#### 4. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the cognitive restructuring technique within cognitive-behavioral group counseling is effective in improving self-esteem among junior high school students. The intervention not only enabled participants to identify and challenge negative thoughts but also provided a supportive emotional environment through therapeutic group dynamics. This reinforces the notion that healthy self-esteem is built through a combination of genuine competence and the experience of being valued as an individual. Furthermore, the restructuring of maladaptive core beliefs into more rational and adaptive perspectives was strengthened by positive social interactions among group members.

However, this study acknowledges several limitations. First, coordinating schedules among participants from different classes posed a challenge, requiring additional flexibility in arranging group sessions. Second, the short interval between sessions may have limited the optimal progression of cognitive and behavioral changes. Third, the sample size was restricted to a small group of students with low self-esteem, limiting the generalizability of the findings. From a practical standpoint, this research recommends that school counselors incorporate cognitive restructuring techniques within group counseling as a regular program to support students' psychosocial development. Such interventions can serve as preventive strategies against negative behavioral risks during adolescence and foster resilience and adaptive functioning in school settings.

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